Esther M. Friesner: I Killed Them in Vegas

Fantasy & Science Fiction

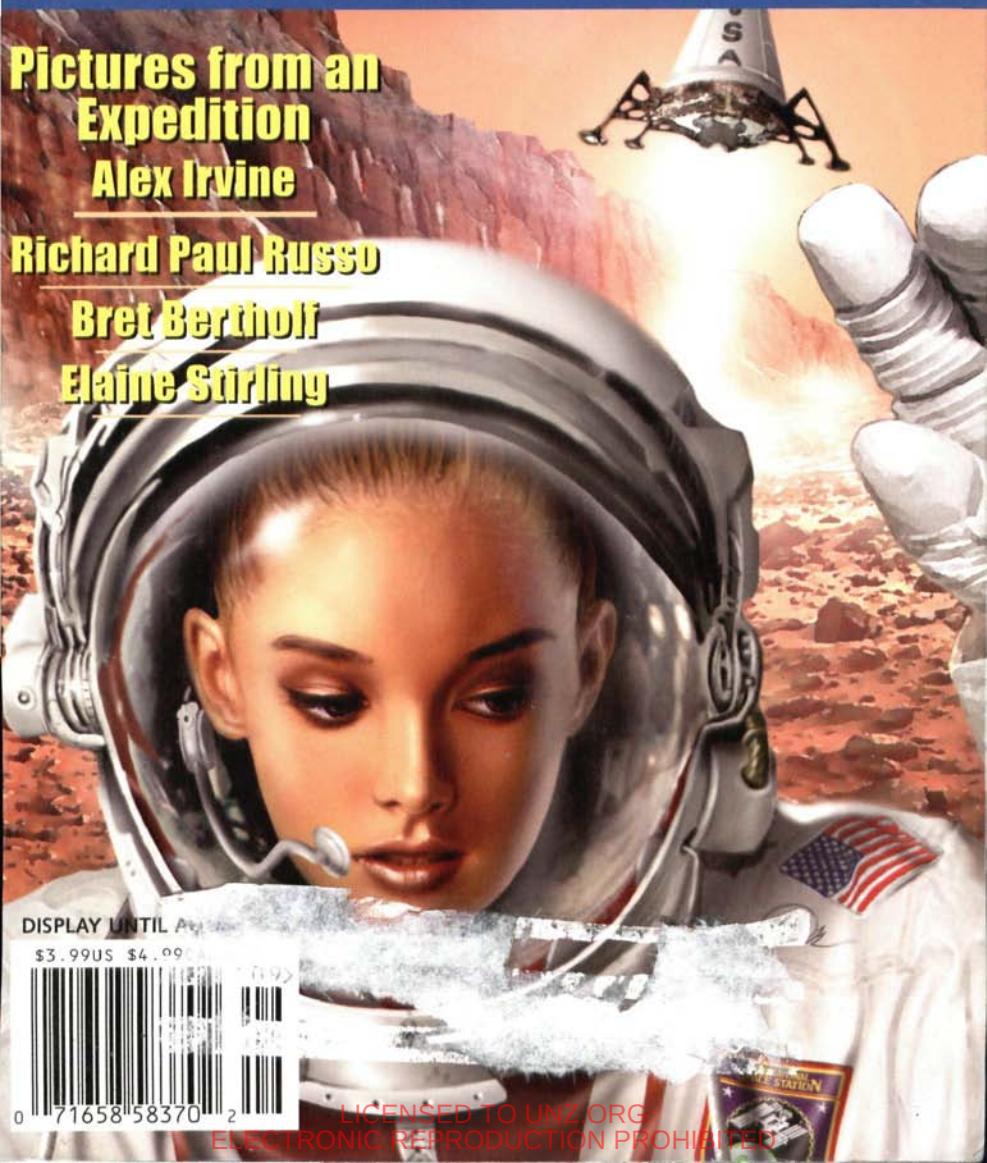
SEPTEMBER

Pictures from an Expedition
Alex Irvine

Richard Paul Russo

Bret Bertholf

Elaine Stirling

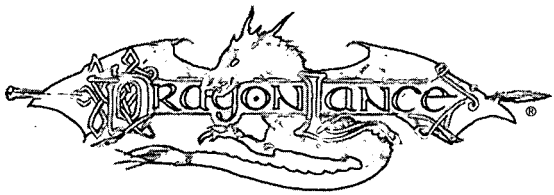


DISPLAY UNTIL A

$3.99US $4.99

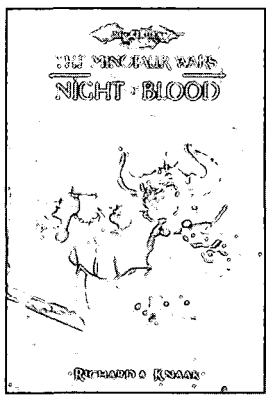
0 71658 58370 2

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



CONTINUED

AVAILABLE
JUNE 2003



Night of Blood, *by best-selling* ***Dragonlance®*** *author Richard A. Knaak, with prologue by Margaret Weis. The first page of a new chapter in the ongoing saga. Pick up your copy, and keep reading.*

www.wizards.com/books

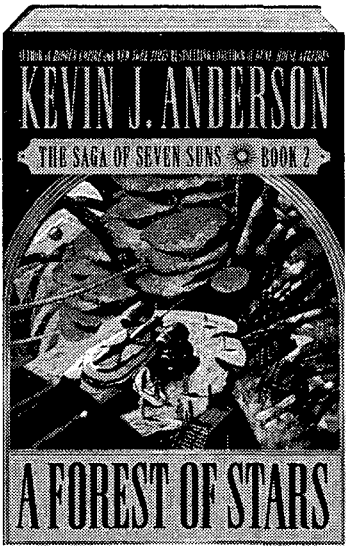
All trademarks are property of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. © 2003 Wizards.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEW FROM

ASPECT

THE MIND-BLOWING SAGA CONTINUES



From *New York Times* bestselling author Kevin J. Anderson comes Book 2 in The Saga of Seven Suns series.

Man has accidentally ignited an interstellar war of epic proportions. Now a fearsome and merciless enemy has been raised. Will the human race have the allies they need? Or will they be caught in the middle of a war that could break apart the galaxy?

"Bestseller Anderson turns up the heat....This saga soars."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

AVAILABLE IN HARDCOVER

READ THE FIRST IN THE SERIES—NOW IN PAPERBACK!

A *USA TODAY* Summer Book Pick

"Delivers action, engaging characters and credible fantastic worlds in spades.... Sizzles with a fast-moving plot....Not to be missed."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"An intelligently conceived and executed nail-biter."
—*Booklist*

ASPECT WHERE IMAGINATION KNOWS NO BOUNDS

An AOL Time Warner Book Group Company Read Excerpts Online at www.twbookmark.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
September • 54th Year of Publication

NOVELLAS

PICTURES FROM AN EXPEDITION 117 Alex Irvine

NOVELETS

ALFRED BESTER IS ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN WINTERSET, IOWA 8 Bret Bertholf

TROPICAL NIGHTS AT THE NATATORIUM 99 Richard Paul Russo

SHORT STORIES

I KILLED THEM IN VEGAS 48 Esther M. Friesner

THE ONLY KNOWN JUMP ACROSS TIME 65 Eugene Mirabelli

WHITE CLOUD 79 Elaine Stirling

DEPARTMENTS

EDITORIAL 6 Gordon Van Gelder

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 38 Charles de Lint

MUSING ON BOOKS 42 Michelle West

COMING ATTRACTIONS 47

FILMS 94 Kathi Maio

CURIOSITIES 162 Paul Di Filippo

CARTOONS: Tom Cheney (7), S. Harris (41).
COVER BY MAURIZIO MANZIERI FOR "PICTURES FROM AN EXPEDITION"

GORDON VAN GELDER, Publisher/Editor BARBARA J. NORTON, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor KEITH KAHLA, Assistant Publisher
HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor JOHN J. ADAMS, Editorial Assistant

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 105, No. 3, Whole No. 621, September 2003. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $3.99 per copy. Annual subscription $44.89; $54.89 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2003 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.

Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.

GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
www.fsfmag.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

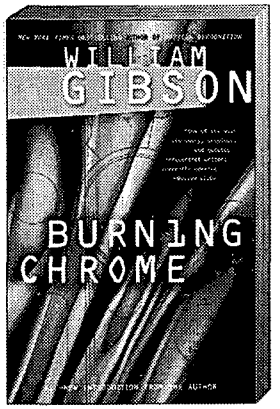
EOS.. TRANSCEND THE ORDINARY

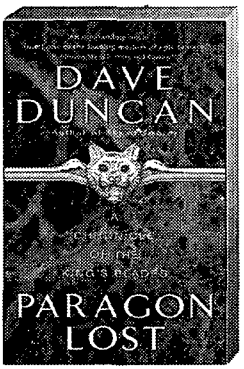
BURNING CHROME
WILLIAM GIBSON

"William Gibson is one of the most visionary, original, and quietly influential writers currently working." —*Boston Globe*

"Gibson's work . . . [has] transformed the face of the genre." —*People*

TRADE PAPERBACK $13.95 ($21.95 CAN.)





PARAGON LOST
A Chronicle of the King's Blades
DAVE DUNCAN

"Outstanding. . . . Rich evocative language and superior narrative skills lift this mix of quest, swordplay, politics, love, and honor high. . . . One of the leading masters of epic fantasy." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

MASS MARKET PAPERBACK $7.50 ($9.99 CAN.)

To subscribe to the online monthly Eos newsletter, "OUT OF THIS WORLD" go to **www.eosbooks.com**

EOS HarperEntertainment

Imprints of HarperCollins*Publishers* www.harpercollins.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

THERE HAS been a lot going on around here, and it's well past time for me to bring you up to date on all the recent news.

First item is that we've finally got a message board on the Web, thanks to the good people at Night Shade Books. The URL for the site is *www.nightshadebooks.com/discus*, or just go to our Website *(www.fsfmag.com)* and follow the link there. The message board has been up for several weeks already, and it has been great for discussing specific stories (or for trying to locate old and half-remembered stories) and for arguing about movies.

We're also using the message board to spread the word about things like the fact that our June issue shipped late to subscribers (sorry about that, folks), so if you have computer access and you've got a question about the magazine, the message board is a good place to start.

In other news, we've got a new foreign edition of *F&SF*. We've struck a deal with the Israeli Society for SF and Fantasy to reprint some of our stories in the magazine *The Tenth Dimension*. We're delighted to add them to our other sister publications — we have editions in Russia, Japan, and Sweden — and we hope to close deals soon in a couple of other countries. Dotan Dimet edits *The Tenth Dimension*, and, while I can't claim to read Hebrew even when the vowels are in place, I can say that his story selections have been very impressive. You can find info on the magazine online at *www.sf-f.org.il/static/act3.htm*.

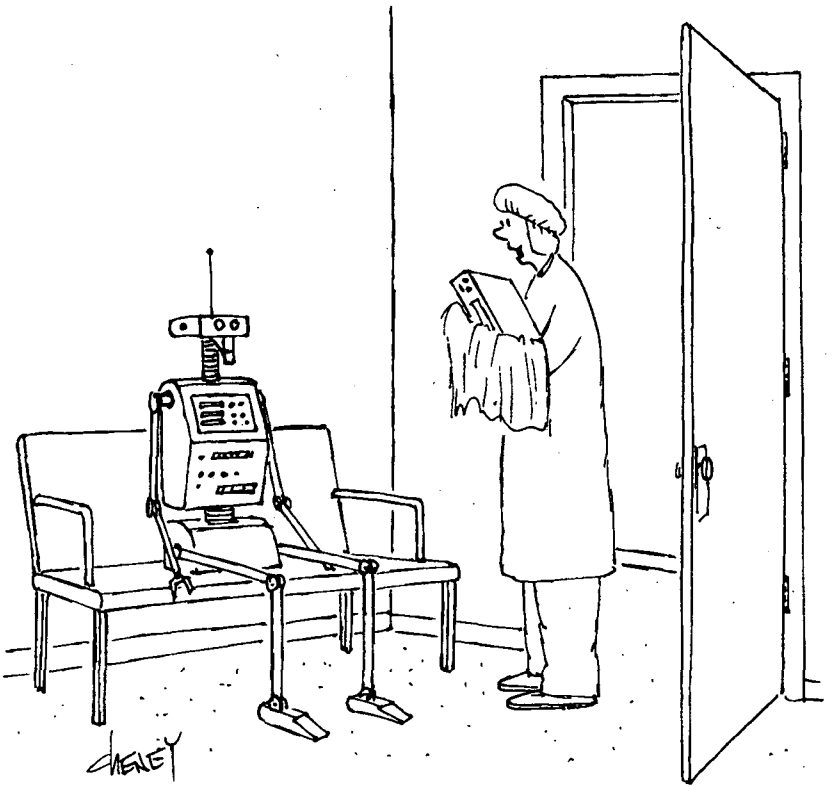
We also have a new edition here in the U.S. This year Audible.com has begun publishing audio editions of *F&SF*, and the results thus far have been terrific. Audible understands that the readers bring as much to the stories as the writers themselves do, and they use a team of veterans, including Stefan Rudnicki and a fellow named Harlan

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ellison, whose voice might be familiar to some of our readers. These audio editions are great for anyone who drives a lot, or (to point out the obvious) anyone who enjoys hearing a good story. Check them out at *www.audible.com*.

We've got a big bibliography of *F&SF*'s first fifty years in the works, and I'm hopeful that we'll have it up on our Website by the time this issue is in print. We'll do our best to keep you up to date on changes and other news as it happens around here.

— GVG



"Congratulations — it's a DVD player."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bret Bertholf lives in Denver, Colorado, and works for the Tattered Cover bookstore. He also plays in a rockabilly band and recently illustrated Allen Kurzweil's book for young readers, Leon and the Spitting Image. *At the moment, he's working on* The Long Gone Lonesome History of Country Music, *an illustrated book for young readers.*

"Winterset" is his first published story and it's a doozy — both an homage to the mind-bending fiction of Alfred Bester and an inventive tale in its own right. By the time this issue of ours hits the stands it should also be available in chapbook form from Wormhole Books.

Alfred Bester Is Alive and Well and Living in Winterset, Iowa

By Bret Bertholf

I WAKE UP TO THE SOFT padding of an enormous sphinx at the foot of my bed. Its hide shimmers in the thin half-light of the ward, like an ebony idol. Its face is long and elegant, the eyelids carved heavy and deep, sleepy like Violet Dugan in *The Flowered Thundermug.* She's a carnal creature of inscrutable lusts, but somehow familiar. She parts her bee-stung lips and says,

"alfrEd bester is alive aNd well and living in winTERset, iowa."

Then she coughs, turns her preposterous head on its side, heaves twice, her shoulders flexing in discomfort, rolling purple and green hair over savage muscles. Eventually she spits up a ball of fur.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It's a sticky mess. There'll be no sorting it out.

I look back up at the sphinx, wanting to talk to it, but the sphinx is gone.

I don't know where she's gone, but she's definitely no longer at the end of my bed. It's not normal. I'm not normal. I'm old, falling apart. And I signed up for neural implants as soon as Eldertech was offered for just that reason, because I hoped it would return me to normalcy. It's very important to me to seem normal.

But it doesn't help that I see things that most likely don't exist. The implants helped at first, but as my health deteriorated, they've only intensified many of my fantasies and hallucinations.

For instance, I am convinced, frequently, that I am being pursued by three men who come to me in different combinations, with different names. Historical figures, friends from my youth, and even people I've never seen before. None of it is to be trusted. Nurse Dubedat explains that the nanotech is still so new, the implants in my head so alien, that it may be my mind's attempt to sort things out. Confusion is, of course, a normal part of senility. "You're doing better than many men of your advanced age," she says.

Some comfort. But the thought does inspire me to check my messages, to see if perhaps my sphinx is an electronic courier. Neither rain nor snow nor addled brain....

Eyes left, center, and left again. At least I remember that. I seem to have spasms of lucidity. I wait for the icon, like nurse Dubedat instructed, and when it appears, I hold my eyes on it until it opens.

5,271,009 MESSAGES

As I've had so few messages, except for advertisements, I'm shocked. After a few moments, the titles of the first thirty or so float before me like the ghosts of road signs.

I read:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

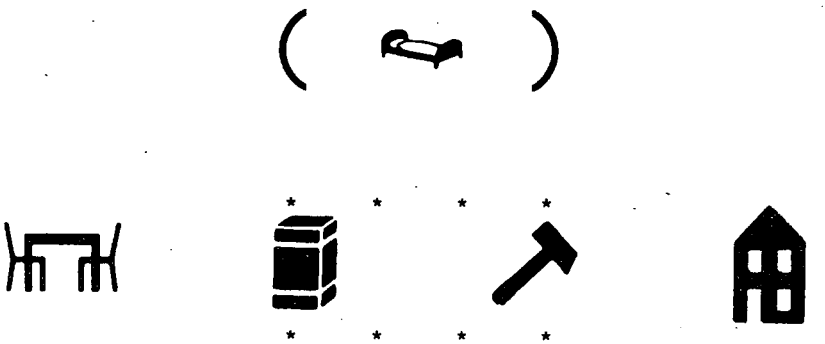
alfred besTEr is alive aNd well and living in winterSet, iOwa
alfRed beSter is AIlve anD well and living in winTerset, iowa
alfrEd bester is alive aNd well and living in winterSet, iowa
alfred bEsteR Is alive aNd well and liVing in wintErSet, iowa
alfred besTer Is alive and well and livinG in winterset, iowA
alfred besTEr is alive and well and living in winterset, iowa
alFred bester Is alive aND well and living in winterSet, iowA
alFrEd bester Is alive aNd well and living in winTersEt, iowa
alfred bester is alive and well and livinG in winteRset, iowa
Alfred besTer Is alive and well and living in winterset, iOwa
alfred bester is alive aNd well and living in winteRsEt, iowa
alfred beSter IS alive and well and living in winTerset, iowa
alfred bester is alive aNd well and living in winTErset, iowa
alfred bester is alive and well and livinG in winteRset, iowA
alfred besTEr is alive and well aNd living in winterset, iowA
alfred bester is alive and well aNd living in winterset, iOwa
alfred bester is aLIve and well and living in winterset, iowa
alFrEd bester is Alive and well and Living in winterset, iowa
aLfred bester is alive and well and living in winterset, iOwa
alFred bester is aLIve and well and living in winterset, iowa
alFrEd bester is Alive aNd well and living in winterSet, ioWa
alfrEd besteR iS alive and WEll and living in Winterset, iowa
Alfred bester Is alive and well and living in winTerset, iowa
alFred bester is alive and well and living in winterset, iOwa
alfRed besteR is alivE And well and living in winterSet, iowa
alfred bester is alive and well and living in winterset, iOwa
alfred bester is alive aNd well and living in winterSet, iowa
alfred bester is alive and WEll and living in Winterset, iowA
alfred bester is alive and well aNd living in winTerset, iowa
alfred besTer is alive and well and living in winterset, iOwa
alfred besteR is alivE and well and living in winterSeT, iowa

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I open the first message.

I'm in the gray room. It's used for their therapy programs. They jack you in, and your eyes guide you through their exercises. Sometimes it's Nurse Dubedat's voice guiding me, other times I just follow the Eldertech icons. Sometimes I sit in the gray room for what feels like days.

Now it's empty. I'm alone. I feel....



I open my eyes and I see

in a sienna suit and skinny tie.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The man reaches forward, but somehow can't reach me. I look at my own hand, gnarled, riddled with age, spotted like it was stained by spilled coffee.

Next the man speaks. He says, "Mr. Buchanan, my name is Israel Lennox. Can you speak? Can you tell me where you are?"

I cough. I strain my vocal chords, and in a reedy voice say, "No."

Lennox smiles. "You're disoriented. It'll take a while for you to adjust, and you can expect some rather severe and vivid...episodes."

I look around. The gray room remains the gray room. Lennox remains Lennox. In the corner is a goon, someone impatient with Lennox. He's tall, mop-headed, and currently examining his patent leather shoes. A government man; a civil servant.

Lennox says, "I'm going to ask you some questions. They will help you orient yourself in the present. We should have anywhere from five to fifteen minutes for the interview."

"Interview?" I whisper.

"I'll explain in a bit. First, can you tell me your full name?"

"Stuart Buchanan."

"Good. Your age?"

"Eighty-eight, I believe."

"Eighty? Oh. That's okay, Mr. Buchanan. A few lapses are bound to appear. We have you as ninety-four years old."

"What?"

"We'll return to that...."

I don't want to *return* to it. I want to talk about it now. "I'm ninety-four years old?! What year is this?"

"Mr. Buchanan, please. We're on a strict time budget. We've managed to stem an acute swelling of your cerebral cortex, and stimulated your memory and speech centers, but we need to ask you some more questions while we still can."

I decide it's best to stand at attention. Or am I? I'm in the gray room, Lennox is in a chair, the goon is behind him, and I'm...where?

"Please, Mr. Buchanan. Everything will be explained during the interview, if we have the time. Please, if you would just go to your eye icon. It will help you, and us, to understand."

I go to the eye. I look away quickly, then back. A 2-D image assembles

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in front of me. I minimize it and move it off to the left of Lennox. He asks, "Who is this, please?"

"It's me, in 1959, during basic training in the U.S. Army. It was the beginning of two awful years."

"How were they awful?"

"It was when I learned, or maybe gave up on...why are you asking me that?"

"It's not important. Not yet. Please scroll to the next image."

I look down at an > and hold on it. My nineteen-year-old face dissolves but nothing replaces it.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothing. Much of your network has degenerated since its installation, some of it past usable levels. We've established a make-shift substitute, tying into the old workings, but there will be delays." The goon snorts behind Lennox. Lennox shoots him a look. "This is my colleague, Henry Hassel. He's anxious for results."

"What results?" And then an image of Sima appears in place of the army I.D. It's her last passport photo, taken just before the trip to England, while she was pregnant, before the accident. She thought she looked drugged in the picture.

"That's your wife, Sima Buchanan, née Morgan, isn't it?" Lennox asks.

"Yes."

"What year?"

"2005, I think."

"December, '04," Lennox corrects.

"'04."

"You were married when you were sixty, correct?"

"Yes."

"And she was forty-one?"

"Yes. What's your point?"

"No point, Buchanan. I'm just testing the new networks. We've got a lot of ground to cover, and I want to be sure you're up for it. Can you identify the next image, please?"

Already I know it's going to be Jemmy. Lennox's weasly eyes narrow. He's trying to guess what I'm thinking, gauge if he's going too fast, if he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ought to try a different direction. Maybe he can tell I'm getting annoyed, that he's keeping too much from me. I decide to just ask.

"This is about Jemmy, right? Who are you, and why do you need me?"

Lennox's eyebrows shoot up. Hassel sidles up behind him and sighs. Lennox casts a perturbed look over his shoulder, still in charge, though when he looks back at me his expression softens. He goes all gentle.

"Yes, Mr. Buchanan, it's about your daughter. We believe she is in serious danger."

"So what? She's been in danger ever since she started working for you guys. What are you, CIA?"

Lennox looks surprised again. "We're not exactly with the government, Mr. Buchanan. At least, not in the way you'd think. I know that you and your daughter have not been on speaking terms for some time, but...."

"Damn right. She dumped me in this place. A veteran's hospital. Is there anything worse? You come in here telling me that I'm ninety-four years old and that my daughter's in danger. You better start explaining, or I'm logging off."

"Mr. Buchanan. Please. You *can't* log off. You don't understand the situation, your position. Things have changed since you were truly lucid. Do you even follow current events? Are you aware of the current chaos in our government? Jemmy was high clearance. Much of the technology that's allowing us to communicate right now was developed by Jemmy and her husband. The whole Eldertech program grows out of their research. Many of the Eldertech recipients, such as yourself, are storing...er, strategically significant data. Peter was working with us before he disappeared, as was Jemmy, transferring intelligence. So you see, we're up against a strict timetable. We've got to find Jemmy while we still can. If we still can."

"Look, Lennox. I don't have a clue who you are, or whether anything you're telling me is true. Probably not. But if you know anything about me and my daughter, then you'd know that coming to me is a waste of time."

Lennox smiles. "No, Mr. Buchanan. We know quite a bit about you and your daughter, and that's precisely why we came to you. You will be able, with our help, to locate Jemmy quickly. After all, she sent you messages."

"*She* sent me those messages?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Indeed. Mr. Buchanan, look: if we have the time I'll explain everything I can, but I've got to ask you a few questions first. Please, I want you to tell me about

Alfred Bester
IT'S HIM! ALFRED BESTER! HE'S GOT THAT DAMN CRAVAT, AND HE NEVER LOSES HIS CIGARETTE!
LOOK OUT, KID!
YOU'VE GOT TO RUN! I'LL HOLD 'EM OFF AS LONG AS I CAN...
YOU'LL HAVE A HEAD START! FIND HER! FIND JEMMY!
DARK FORCES GATHER AND ATTACK! THEY'RE NOT PLAYING FAIR!
FOOOM
QUICK KID! INTO THE CAR!
I HAVE ONLY SECONDS. I DIVE INTO THE CAR AS THE ENTIRE AREA IS ENGULFED IN FLAMES!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Where you going, Mister?"

In the front seat is a tough-looking kid, maybe seventeen, or a little older, his T-shirt sleeves rolled up to reveal freckled biceps. There's a cigarette in his thin and curling lips. His red hair is greased into a fierce pompadour. Next to him is a girl who looks all of twelve. It's hot in the car, even for November, but she wears a brown and orange plaid jacket. Her hair is greasy and obscures half her face. She doesn't look back at me.

I look around. We're on a paved highway, the sun is high. I roll my eyes, looking for icons, and find nothing. I feel...I feel great. Completely lucid, only at a complete loss.

"Mister?" the kid says again. "Where you going?" His voice is high, like Mickey Rooney convincing his cronies to put on a show.

"I'm not going anywhere," I say. "Where's Lennox? What happened?"

"Lennox? I don't know any Lennox."

"The questioning man. Brown coat, small neck."

"Look, Mister, you got in my car. Do you need a ride or not?" The kid snaps his eyes between the road and the rearview mirror. He shifts his weight, sitting up to appear taller.

I don't know if I need a ride. I don't know what I'm doing here or how I got here. It must be some aspect of the gray room, but it feels real enough. Times have changed so much; I'm not sure if I'd even know the difference between hallucinating and virtual reality. Perhaps what I'm experiencing is virtual senility?

"I'm looking for my daughter," I say. "Where are we?"

The kid relaxes a little. He says, "You tell me, old man. We're outside some small town in Iowa. Wintertime, or something. You were just standing on the side of the road. You lost?"

An odd moment passes. What was I doing? Was I wandering away from the hospital in a state of dementia? How'd I even get out the door? What should I tell the kid? Should I ask him to take me back?

"I'm...I'm looking for my daughter, Jemmy Marko."

"Marko," the kid says, considering, "that name is familiar."

"Really? It's an odd name, one you don't hear too often. Her husband's name is Peter."

The kid's face falls. "Peter Marko? The Pi-guy? I shoulda killed that son-of-a...."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The girl's head jerks toward the kid. "Jimmy," she whispers.

The kid takes his right hand from the wheel and cocks it over his left shoulder, like he means to backhand her. "I told you not to say my name!"

It's quiet. No one says a word. The kid glares at the girl. Finally he says, "Just sit there. Don't say a thing! Pretend you're not here. Pretend you're not even a person. You're a robot, or something. And take off that stupid jacket, it must be 98 degrees freaking Fahrenheit."

The girl makes a whimpering noise, brushes the hair from her eyes, always looking down. Then, defiantly, she reaches over and snaps on the radio.

The radio crackles and then an announcer's voice erupts from the speaker.

"...goes out to Vice President Nixon, standing in for Ike in the hospital. The Russians may have the Sputniks, but we have *Great Balls of Fire!*" Then Jerry Lee Lewis starts to growl.

The kid turns off the radio and then reaches for something under the seat. In a moment he's up and twisting around, aiming a sawed-off shotgun in my face. He says, "Make a wish," and then he pulls the trigger.

I open my eyes in the gray room. A fat pasty man sits in front of me frowning.

"There you are, Buchanan. We lost you for a minute," he says.

"Who are you?"

"Dr. Lennox, remember? Think back. We were talking, but there was interference in our connection."

"But you're not Lennox. I remember." He's so different. This man looks more like the man identified by Lennox as Henry Hassel. I look over the fat man's shoulder, but this time there's no one else in the gray room.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Buchanan, but your memory has become extremely corrupted. I'm doing my best to help you, but...."

"Wait a minute," I say. "Who was that kid? He shot at me! Am I all right?"

"Mr. Buchanan, stay calm. I think it may be possible that you are, in the words of your daughter, skipping files. You remember that we're looking for your daughter, right?"

I nod.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Good. This is part of the process. It's how we want you to help us look. But you've got to concentrate. I need you to stay with me for as long as you can. I'm running as many searches in your databases as I can, but you're overloaded with the messages Jemma sent you. Many of them are encoded in what is almost crude basic programming. We've hacked into DefenseNet, but all we can get from them in terms of I.D. is '1957.'"

I look at this Lennox. He's sweating. His upper lip shimmers and he wipes it with a meaty paw. A roll of fat under his chin nearly covers his collar and the knot of his tie. He seems to have a slight twitch, followed by a quick blink.

I look down. The icons are all back, but at the far right there's a new one. Lennox begins talking again.

"Tell me about yourself, Mr. Buchanan. What *kind* of man are you?"

"What kind of man?" I ask. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"A lot. You must be with us. It helps if you're focused. Talking."

I think about this some, wondering if I'm in any position to do anything else. I reach out a hand and try to touch Lennox, but he's somehow just out of reach. I look at the new icon, and looking at it say, "I'm the kind of man who dies alone. The kind of man who specializes in mistakes." Then I open the icon.

There are times when my heart races for no reason. Or for no reason I can identify. There may be someone in my room, or I may be eating, and suddenly I'm filled with apprehension. But it's been this way for years. I've always considered it a part of getting old. I attribute it to stray memories. Maybe something, a scent or a flash of light, that reminds me of Sima, or how it felt when the police told me I couldn't see her broken body. And times before that. Like when I was a kid hitchhiking my way to New York for a science fiction convention and the first car pulled over. Or how I felt when I was waiting for Jemmy to be born. That's what I attribute it to, anyway.

There are also times that go on for just a moment, and when I look up a day has passed. I receive certain medications. Paranol, for instance.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There are times when Nurse Dubedat brings in the meds, says, "It's good to see you this morning," leaves, then walks in a moment later. She'll say, "It's good to see you this morning," and I'll say, "but you just said that!" And she'll say, "Mr. Buchanan," and purse her lips and roll her eyes, "I haven't been in since yesterday." Then she'll tell me how much better I'm doing.

Now my heart races though I'm not thinking of anything in particular. My eyes sting and the familiar smell of tobacco, long absent from my world, surrounds me, hugs me, makes me warm and comfortable. I sit down in the arms of the cloud.

There's a general din, glasses clanking, laughter, voices rumbling, and above it all, the nasal percussion of a man's voice, with a Brooklyn accent, reading. The voice is familiar, like a recording I've heard before.

I turn my head toward it, and through smoke, through other heads craning to see, I catch a glimpse of Solon Aquila, the beat poet.

"*HimmelHerrGottSeiDank!*" he yells. "I'm crazy, man, crazy. Eclectic, by God. The *Weltmann* type, *nicht wahr*? My ideal: Goethe. *Tout le monde.* God damn."

I squint, trying to figure this scene out. It's him, all right. Solon Aquila. Even though I know he's been dead since the late '90's. But what's stranger is that he's young, like in the early photos of him in New York with Odysseus Gaul. Around the time Gaul wrote *On the Road*. From the corner of the room comes the mad sound of bongos banging erratically.

A waitress with a brown tray bumps my table and says, "What'll it be?"

She's tall, and wearing what looks like a one-piece cat suit. She has amber hair that falls in cascading curls around her face. Her eyes are heavy-lidded, like Galatea Galante, the film star from the fifties.

I don't know what to say. I look down, up again, back down, thinking about icons, about the gray room. There's nothing. I'm in a bar somewhere. After a moment she says, "Come on, old man, you want a Ballantine or what?"

I say, "Lennox?"

She says, "You can call me whatever you want as long as you order something."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

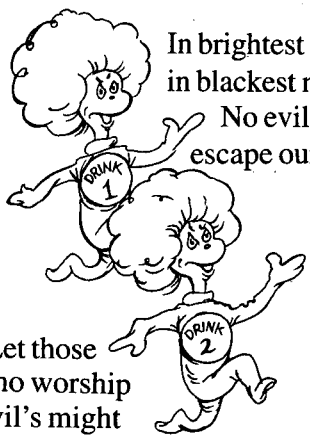
"I'm looking for my daughter," I say quickly. "Her name is Jemmy Marko."

The waitress's eyes bug out. "Jemmy Marko?! JEMMY MARKO?!" She pulls a chair out from the other side of my table, and steps up on it. Then she climbs up onto the table above me. I don't know what to do. I stand up, step back.

Heads swivel as she mounts the table and extends her arms. She's up on her toe-tips, throwing her head back like she's a diver on the cliffs of Brazil. She yells, "You will see something new! After Drink One and Drink Two!" Then she bends at the knees, flexes her muscles and leaps toward me from the table. I hardly have time to reach up to her, or to duck, when two strange little creatures dash out from under the table and catch her. They look like miniature clowns with blue fright wigs. Their faces are taut and old, with skin like antique paper. They set the waitress on the ground and proceed to tear the bar apart, first knocking over my table and chairs, then flinging bottles and cans of beer at people's heads. They move so fast it's hard to keep your eyes on them, bouncing from table to chair to bar to floor to stage, queer participants in some kind of savage video game.

Solon Aquila, still on the stage, yells, "*I've seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness....*"

Drink One and Drink Two run full tilt from the stage toward me, and they are screaming as they do so.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A police officer pushes his way in through the front door, calling for everyone to stay put, but it's pandemonium. People are ducking behind the overturned tables, and running for any available exit. Glasses and windows shatter.

Then Drink One knocks me over, and Drink Two kicks me on the side of the head.

It's dark. I'm afraid that something serious has happened to me. I can't feel my hands or my feet, or I can, but they feel infinite, like they extend for miles. I can't move my head. I look down, and there are the icons again. An odd row of symbols, hovering against a black field. Some are familiar, most are new.

I look at one and then another, but nothing is happening, none of them open.

Still, I'm thinking, I'm remembering, and that at least is something. It's time, I think, to look at facts, at what I think I know.

I know that I am old, perhaps older than I'd thought. I know that I'm infirm, that I live in a hospital. I know that I am connected to something like an Internet; possibly, though, something military in nature. There are people who may be guiding me through programs, virtual realities, absurd scenes that don't make a lot of sense.

When I ask about my daughter, I get violent reactions.

I know that I am in pain. My head is throbbing, on fire where the little clown kicked me. My chest is also burning, but at some kind of remove. It feels like mild heartburn, around the area where that boy, James, James Vandeleur, the infamous serial killer, pointed his shotgun.

And I am hearing voices. Pieces of a conversation.

"Establishing link," "Nothing substantial," "Few hours," "The nanotech," "Isolate degenerate matter," "Creative hyper links," "Buchanan," "Bester," "Shouldn't be this hard," "Coming on line, we should have...."

These words cut across my consciousness like lightning, like bursts of static on a radio. Now I want to stay in the darkness. Now I don't want to see the faces connected to those voices. Now I don't want to be a puppet any longer.

I look at the envelope icon, look away, then stare at it hard. Nothing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I do it again, and then again. The messages, I think. I've got to get to them, open them. But there are so many. I look away from the icon, and back again. I will it to open. If it does, it does so gently, and I feel as though I'm falling asleep, the voices receding, the darkness swallowing me like a great whale.

Here is a familiar scene, a reunion, of sorts. There's the four of us sitting around a table....

For years after I got out of the army, and, in fact, before I went in, I wanted to write science fiction. Once, in 1957, when I was seventeen, I hitchhiked my way out to New York for a convention. I wanted to meet the Guests of Honor, Alfred Bester and Cyril Kornbluth. Bester didn't show. But it was there that I met Lela Machan, Nathan Riley, and George Hamner. They edited a small fan magazine from their shared apartment in Edgewater, New Jersey, and somehow I'd become one of their subscribers after reading an ad in the back of one of the pulps. They seemed so glamorous when I first met them because they were all in their early twenties. I'd fostered hopes they would publish a story of mine, though when I finally sat with them, as I would many times, around some anonymous kitchen table or a booth in a bar, they tore my work apart.

In fact only one of us would ever have anything printed professionally, and that was Lela. One of her historical romances about Ben Hur.

"I...I thought you were all dead," I say, looking at each of them.

"Dead?" says Nathan Riley. "Dead? We're still right here, Stuart. What's dead is the plot to this new story of yours. Dead and decomposing."

"What plot?" I ask.

"*This* story, **alfreD bester Is aliVe and well and livING in wINterset, iowa.**"

I stare at Nathan, unsure what to say to him, unsure if it really is him. It sure looks like him. It sure sounds like him.

"It's a sticky mess," Nathan says. "There may be no sorting it out."

I start to object, but George Hamner, his bald head gleaming, says, "He's right, you know, Stuart. It's all wacky."

Lela says, "Let me help." She grabs a stapled manuscript out of George's hand.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Okay, you've got some kind of tech-interface with the human brain, and you're looking for your daughter, I mean, your character, Jonathan's daughter, who's sent you messages."

"A *lot* of messages," George adds. "About Alfred Bester! You know, I finally *did* meet him. It was in Ireland, of all places, in 1978, at the writer's conference."

"Really?" asks Nathan. "I don't think I ever got to see him. And even if I did, I probably wouldn't have been able to say anything to him. I would have just stood there in awe."

"You guys, we're talking about Stuart, or at least his story," says Lela. Then she turns back to me. "We can talk about what Bester represents in the story later. Right now, let's just hit the plot."

"Well, it's just nutty," says George. "He's supposed to be, what, ninety-something years old?"

"You know what would help?" says Nathan. "If we just stopped and threw this story out." The three of them laugh, like they always do, at someone's expense. "No, really, Stu, maybe you ought to have the main character, the 'you' character, want to die. Maybe he's real sick. Maybe his daughter is sending him some kind of virus. A sort of mercy killing online? Pretty good, huh?"

"No, no," Lela says. "I like the state intrigue. I like it that you don't know who these people are who are after the daughter. You've never had a great deal of respect for government, have you, Stu?"

"No," says George. "That's what's wrong with the story. Nathan's right. It should be simple. Between the father and the daughter."

Lela shakes her head. Her red hair shivers on her shoulders. "But it's the trouble that the daughter is in that gives the story its interest, its gravity, don't you think? I mean, he's trying to find her, to rediscover her, maybe for the last time."

"Well, why doesn't he just interface and follow the tracks of the sphinx?"

"That's what he's trying to do, right, Stu? There're complications. He's sort of stuck in a loop of 1957, right?"

"Yes." George now looks at me, with his nose wrinkled, like he'd smelled something foul. It's the look he gives bad movies. "What's with the 1957 stuff?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well it's us, right?" asks Nathan. "1957 is the year we met. It is the BESTER virus, after all."

"Who said anything about a Bester-virus?" I ask.

"Oh, God save us all from Alfred Bester," George says. "I still can't believe that pompous ass pulled the disappearing act on us."

Nathan clears his throat. We can all tell that he's about to deliver his ten best science fiction writers speech. Quickly Lela asserts herself in the conversation. "Bester's problem was that he was enamored with the patriarchal ideal of power-hungry capitalists. You, of all people, Stuart, should be sensitive to that, what with Sima's political bent."

"Sima!" George yells. "Now we're on to it. You know, Stuart, if I didn't know this was all B.S., I'd think you were writing your autobiography." He waves his hands at me, letting me know that he's got a point, not to interrupt just yet. "You really ought to write about her. That's where your feelings are, where the guts are. It's what's missing from the story. Conflict. Emotion. Passion. You need to bring in your dead wife."

"What?"

"Your dead wife, Stuart. That's what this is all about, isn't it? Not really the daughter. I mean the 'you' character, what's his name? Jonathan Strapp in the story. He's you, right? Well, he needs his Sima, his dead wife."

"What are you talking about?" I'm having a hard time with this. It's so nice to spend time with old friends that the circumstances are almost completely lost on me. These, after all, are probably not my friends, if I think of it. They sound just like them, look just like them, know things about me that they ought to know, but what, exactly, is going on? Why are they here? I feel like I keep falling asleep and waking up in different dreams.

"This really isn't like you, Stuart," George says.

"Not like me? Why?"

"Well, look. I mean, this could be a very successful story. There are so many of these around today. They're very popular."

"What do you mean, 'these stories'?"

"Alternate histories."

That's Nathan's cue to jump back into the conversation. "This isn't *alternate* history, it's just history. Stuart's just disguising things, calling them by different names. Look, there's James Vandeleur for Charlie Starkweather. And the Beatniks. That's the best part. Odysseus Gaul. That's great. He's Jack Kerouac, right?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who?"

"Jack Kerouac. Didn't you tell me that he was on a bus you took the last bit of the way into New York? When you first met us? He was on his way from San Francisco or something."

I'm thinking about this when Nathan starts up again. Just like Nathan. Once he gets started, he doesn't like to stop.

"And didn't Dr. Seuss put out *Cat in the Hat* in 1957?"

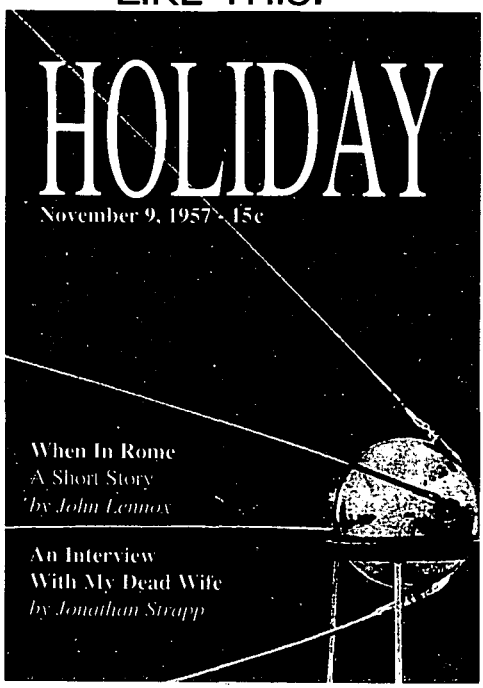
Now I'm very confused. "Dr. Who?"

"Dr. Seuss! Kid's books." Nathan guffaws at me. "Oh hell. It doesn't matter, Stu. The point is, you ought to bring in the wife. It'll add drama. You have to deal with her. Bring her outta the closet. She's got something to do with finding the daughter. She must. Right, Lela?"

Lela says, "I'm not so sure."

"Sure you're sure," Nathan says. He likes feeling right, or like he even has a point, it happens so rarely. "It'll be like a self-help article. Dealing with grief.

LIKE THIS:"



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

An Interview with My Dead Wife

By Jonathan Strapp

I haven't seen Sima in twenty-eight years, if I am, in fact, ninety-four years old. She died in the summer of 2006, two years after the birth of our daughter, Jemmy.

We were an odd couple. I was sixty and she was forty-one when we were married. It's funny, but when she was pregnant, I always thought it was irresponsible of me to have a child at my age. But the looks we got were invigorating. They made me feel strong and young, like I was seventeen. That's something when you're in your sixties. And besides, whose business was it, anyway?

I had thought that by the time Jemmy was a teenager, I'd be gone. But a freak accident took Sima from us in a moment. She was there, and then she wasn't. And then it was just Jemmy and me.

I'm afraid I wasn't the best single father. I panicked. I didn't know what to do. I would say that Jemmy basically raised herself. She and her Aunt and Uncle.

So, Sima. The wife I met at a science fiction convention, the woman who shared so many enthusiasms with me. What she says to me, now, really doesn't make any sense.

"In a representative democracy, an ideal, you, the individual, manipulate the government, right? But here, the government manipulates you. So, the government manipulates you, government precedes culture, culture elaborates technology, and technology created us we you them together.

"You used to talk a lot about paranoia and truth, Stuart. Let's talk about truth."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The truth?" I say. I'm stunned, again by the changes around me, by the fact that I'm talking to my deceased wife. Or at least to her image. Her image asking me to talk about the truth.

"The truth, Stuart. For instance, did I die, or did I leave you?"

"What do you mean? You died! Death brings us to the realization that the world isn't really about individuals. When you died, it wasn't something you did to me. I have some problems with ego, but I'm not so self-centered as to think...."

"Aren't you? Isn't everyone? Grief has its component of anger. Weren't you angry?"

"Sure, I was angry. But mostly for Jemmy."

"Oh, come on. Even you have some access to your own feelings, Stuart. You weren't angry with me for leaving you alone with a one-and-a-half-year-old child?"

"Of course. She kept saying 'Mommie.' What was I supposed to tell her?"

"Didn't you know how to bring me back?"

"What?"

"I'm here, now."

"You're not here. This is...like a dream. Some digital and psychological contrivance. Something conjured by nanotech and my imagination. And besides, if anyone is responsible for this, it's Jemmy. She's the one who sent me all those messages, all that information. Maybe some kind of virus. She's the reason you're here, not me. And I was looking for her, not you."

"But here I am."

"Here you are."

"Am I Jemmy's wish to return to childhood, or your desire to fix the past? To apologize to your daughter."

"What are you talking about? You're a program."

She's quiet for a moment, but her image haunts me, pulls at my heart. I'm at an emotional carnival. Old friends, whole experiences on parade. Do I bring them up, or are they ordered, part of a program meant to ferret out information? Is Lennox leading this, sitting beside my bed, drawing me into dream after dream, consulting a dossier filled with places, dates, events? Are they examining this Bester virus, or just letting the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

information run its course, hoping it will lead them to Jemmy? Did they, perhaps, give me this virus? Is it a virus? Or some new version of interrogation? One where you question yourself?

But here is Sima. Exactly the same as she was, as she is, in my memory. I feel now like I haven't felt in years. In pain, alive, sorry for myself. Her dark hair falls over her right eye and she brushes it away. She looks exactly the same. Like her passport picture.

"Stuart, look around you. Where are we now?"

"I think...I...we're in some kind of laboratory. A high-tech virtual space. I don't know."

"You're in a satellite, Stuart. What are you doing in a satellite?"

I don't know what to say.

"How did I die, Stu?"

"What?"

"Tell me how I died."

"You were crushed, under a satellite that crashed into our kitchen roof."

"You weren't home, were you?"

"No."

"And Jemmy was with you?"

"Yes."

"Stuart, you couldn't know this, I couldn't tell you before now, but the emergency crews arrived before the accident. I saw them parked across the street. Do you know why they were there?"

"No idea."

"Because of OBO. You weren't allowed into the crash site for two weeks, right? You never saw the body."

"That's right."

"That was OBO. The crash was because of OBO."

"Who?"

"OBO. Orbiting Biological Observatory. A satellite. But not just a satellite. A sentient entity. OBO. Developed in the early seventies, launched in '73, under the same umbrella funding Jemmy worked for much later, but still, that's the connection. The FBI told you it was accidental, that the orbit of the satellite that fell had decayed in an erratic fashion, much sooner that expected. But it was OBO's doing. What

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

happened immediately after the crash was information retrieval; nanotech, experimental intelligence. OBO wanted me. He...he had a crush on me."

"What?"

"He had a crush."

"Had a crush?"

"Yes. He had fallen madly in love. OBO has connections. He can control flight patterns."

"This is ridiculous! Lennox? Are you still here?"

I look around me. Dash past Sima, or the image of Sima, to the end of the tubular room, and look out...the window?

Below me is the Earth, the crest of atmosphere glowing like a halo.

"Lennox!"

Sima sighs, "You're still the same, Stuart. You know that? I should have seen it when I married you. What are you now? Ninety-four?"

"What?"

"Oh, for God's sake. 'Alfred Bester is Alive and Well,' right? Do you think we haven't been involved? That we haven't been watching Jemmy and Peter? Guiding them, correcting them? Do you think I wouldn't take an interest in my family and my government?"

"This is silly!"

"No, this is you refusing to look at the truth. The truth, Stuart. You're still concerned with normalcy, with what's possible in your little world. Well, that is something that's changed in you since you were a child. What if you're able to make wishes again, Stuart? What if they could come true?"

"Okay. This isn't silly, it's insane."

I look down at the floor, at something closer to me. They're back. Icons.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Where is home? What does that even mean? Am I at home in the Veterans' Hospital? Is Nurse Dubedat my family? I'm dwelling on what I've lost.

Home.

I'm afraid to open my eyes now. Afraid of who I'll see, or where I'll end up. Afraid of more questions, and no answers that make any sense. At least now, I can be with only myself, at least for the moment. It feels like an hour since I saw Sima's face. Since the hallucination/projection of the satellite laboratory. I want this absurd journey to finally end. I want to know what's going on.

Again, I open my eyes.

Before me, in the gray room, Jemmy sits in the chair once occupied by Lennox. Her head is down, her brown/blond hair is disheveled. It looks stringy and unwashed. She seems defeated, exhausted.

I reach out to her, but again, like Lennox, she is just out of reach, somehow in front of me, but beyond me. She is dressed in a white jumpsuit, the kind of thing you might give a patient, or a prisoner.

I say, softly, "Jemmy."

Her head comes up slowly, hair covering parts of her face, her eyes, but it is her, it is Jemmy.

So where are they? Where are Lennox, and Hassel? The intelligence armies? The dogs at the gates? How did I find Jemmy? Why is she in the gray room?

Jemmy looks at me and says, "Oh my God." A tear runs down her cheek, and she begins wringing her hands in her lap.

I say, "Jemmy."

"I can't believe he did it. He really did it." Something snaps behind Jemmy's blurred eyes, like an idea has just occurred to her. She sits up straight, alert now, wiping the tears from her cheek and sniffing. There's the familiar air of defiance that I remember.

"What's your name?" she says.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's me, your father."

"Say your name!"

"Jemmy, we need to talk."

"Just say your name, damn it!"

"Stuart Buchanan, your father. All right? It's me."

She stares at me, then looks away, biting her lip. After a minute she's scrutinizing me again. "Am I in? Am I back on?" Her eyes dart back and forth, they close, look down and up, down and up again. "I'm on. I'm on. How did you get in here?"

"Jemmy," I say.

She doesn't talk. Now she's moving her arms, eyes still darting. Something happens to the gray room. It shifts subtly, doesn't seem to be a room any longer. Jemmy is starting to stand up. She's trying to leave.

But I don't let her go. I hold her in our crucible. I move to dislocate her from her reality, will her to stay with me.

"Jemmy, I've been looking for you."

"Well, you haven't found me. You can't have found me."

The room settles back into its formal gray cube.

"Jemmy, talk to me. I'm your father, for God's sake."

"You're not my father. At least, not anymore. You don't even know, do you?"

"Know what? Jemmy, talk to me."

She shakes her head, mutters, "Steve." She waves her arms frantically, punching at the air.

"I won't let you go, Jemmy."

She closes her eyes, puts her hands in her lap, and balls them into fists.

"Jemmy."

She opens her eyes. This time she raises her right hand slowly, deliberately, determined to try new processes, new escape routes. I don't think this matters, and somehow, it doesn't.

"Jemmy, let me help you."

She moves her hand to her temple, rubs it as though to soothe an aching head.

She sighs. "My name's not Jemmy. There you go. It's not even a name. No one's named 'Jemmy.' It's a password. Just like 'Stuart Buchanan.' It's my connection to you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Jemmy, I don't know what you mean."

She shrinks back down. Back into the resigned Jemmy I saw when I first opened my eyes.

"Think," she says. "Think about who you are."

"Who I am? I'm Stuart Buchanan."

"That's not your name. It's the name of a furniture store! Not a person. No. My dad is not Stuart Buchanan. I'll tell you who he is. He's a crotchety old prick of a man, who alienated my mother a year before she died of breast cancer; a man who handed me over to his wife's sister because he was too much of a selfish bastard to make concessions.

"Jesus. I spent years of my life trying to impress you. Why do you think I even went into the sciences in the first place? Because of you and your private fantasy world of discoveries and popular science. I thought if you read about me in your magazines, you might want to know me.

"And where are you now? Stuck in a nursing home in Iowa. Feeble-minded and incontinent. You don't know what day it is, and you don't know your name."

"Jemmy. My name is Stuart Buchanan. You are Jemmy Marko, my daughter."

The tear is back on Jemmy's cheek. She wipes it away.

"You are not my father. You're a virus. A computer virus, all right? You don't even...damn it! I don't have time for this."

"I won't let you go, Jemmy. I've found you. It's what Lennox said I'm to do. But I wanted to see you for myself, not just for Lennox. They said you were in trouble. They needed me to find you."

"Yes, I know. There are a lot of people looking for me. But Steven must have known, he must have sent you to my father."

"Jemmy, what do you mean by calling me a virus?"

She sighs again. "Like I said, 'Jemmy' is a password. It's my password. My husband's was 'Peter Marko.'"

"Peter Marko? The Pi-Man?"

"Yes. He designed the Bester virus. You."

"Bester?"

She looks at me again. I'm suddenly self-conscious. I must look a wreck. An old man, returning to his daughter after years of neglect.

"Will you let me run a survey?" she says.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do what you want," I say. "But you can't jaunt off-line. I only just found you, I can't let you go."

"*Jaunt* off-line," she says, and purses her lips. "You talk like Steven." Then she moves her eyes, her thumb and her forefinger. It looks like sign-language.

"Oh, God," she says. "You have to let me out. Dad...Stuart, how long have you been running?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I can't find the install...you can't have been running since...Stuart! Tell me who killed Peter Marko?"

I flash on the getaway car, on the angry kid and his weird robotic partner. "James Vandaleur," I say.

Jemmy's mumbling to herself. "Who's Vandaleur? Where's the date...where's the connection?"

"Jemmy," I say, "I'm not here to hurt you. I want to help. I know I've been an awful father. I was never there for you. But I'm here for you now. Talk to me. Tell me what I should do."

"Listen to me. You are not real. You are a virtual intelligence, a computer virus. You are named Stuart Buchanan after a short story by Alfred Bester. Stuart Buchanan was a child who could make his own wishes come true."

"Do I look like a little kid?"

"That's just it. You're mutated. Adapted to your host. You're activated by opening messages in a host body, creating networks. That body is organic. My dad's body. But the network is virtual. Steven did most of the delivery development."

"Steven?"

"My husband. 'Peter Marko.' The virus is administered with codes and string passages that make reference to the work of Alfred Bester."

She's paranoid, raving, creating stories to substitute for a painful past. But why shouldn't she be paranoid? People are after her. I'm after her. And this crazy conversation is no stranger than meeting her mother on a satellite. I want to shock her into a recognition of her delusion, to show her, somehow, that I am really her father. A real man who lived an entire life. A failed man, perhaps. Maybe even failing still, but a real person.

"Tell me more," I say.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Steven created you as a kind of radical insurgence. I didn't think he'd ever set you loose, but he did. Things are worse. He must have sent you to my father just before they picked him up. Just before...."

"Jemmy, where are you now?"

"Underground. No connections, no interfacing...at least until just now. I don't know how it's happened. And you! Look at these port interfaces. There are thousands...you've been talking to satellites, crossing borders, skipping files. These connections are listed as Steven's character names. They're your I.D.'s."

"What do you mean?"

"When you interface, you sequester the sites as names from Alfred Bester stories. Things like 'Odysseus Gaul,' or 'Lela Machan.'"

"Why would Peter...your husband, do this? You're saying that my memories, my consciousness, is some kind of a weapon?"

"No. Well...sort of. Steven and I work for the Defense Department. You were meant to be chaotic, mutable, and adaptive. You grew in relation to each interface. It's fractal engineering. Steven's specialty, not mine."

"Jemmy, this is ridiculous. I'm a person. I've lived a life. I remember it. I'm a normal man with an extraordinary daughter. Look, when you and Peter came to me with the chance to reconnect with life through the VA and the Eldertech programming, I jumped at it. I'm still a senile mess, but without these connections, I wouldn't even know your name."

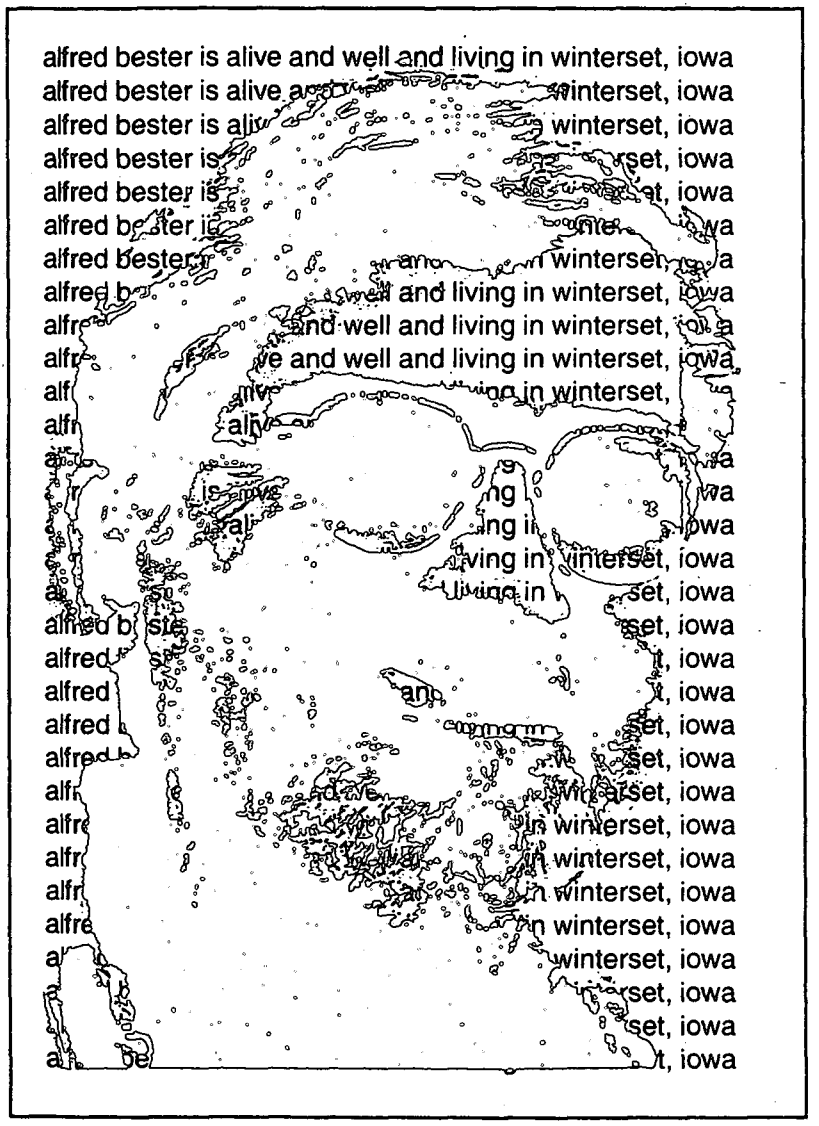
"Where do you think that money came from? The millions of dollars to install nanotech in the infirm and elderly? The Defense Department! That's our biggest contract. And why do you think the Defense Department would be interested in a marginal population?"

"Because we're not marginal! We're baby-boomers. We have all the money! We want quality lives and quality deaths. I'm a little bit older than that group, born in 1940, but it's what makes the world go around."

"You're not completely real, Stuart. Dad. Please. You've got to let me go. I know enough now to get away, if you'll let me. Steven knew you'd come for me. I think he may have sent you as a messenger. Think of it, Dad. You've been so disappointed in life, wanting to be a writer and failing. Failing as a father. I'm sorry, but it's true. Use the parts of you that you took from my Dad, and think about what you've done. Think of what you are now. About what you could be. Stuart Buchanan, a kid who could wish

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for things, and make them come true. A computer connection. The Word made Flesh."



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Here is a mental exercise I'm entertaining as I look down into, up from, across a room in a veteran's hospital. There is my old emaciated body, with a wrist-band that has a nondescript Mid-Western name printed on it, the back of the head with a number of mechanisms emerging from the scalp. Around the bed are machines, nurses, and doctors. Also, a man I think of as Israel Lennox, though which one is Lennox changes from time to time.

Lennox is thanking me now for helping his organization, such as it is, locate Jemmy Marko. I make the old mouth say, "I didn't help you."

But here is the exercise, the question brought to me by my sphinx. Suppose, as my daughter Jemmy said, I am the Word made Flesh, a manifestation of programming combined with biology. Is it, in effect, any different from having been a character in a story that could wish for anything and have it come true? Suppose, for instance, that I had wished more than anything to be a real person, with normal problems and a normal family. That would certainly mean facing disappointment and failure.

Perhaps now, on the other side, my wish would be to return to childhood, to remain forever enchanted, full of possibilities. And I would chase away my pursuers and set them on some eternal treadmill, a path to nowhere.

Often, I think I might choose to only exist between covers, only in the minds of readers, of real people, people with humor and grace and convictions. All of whom are disappointed and stuck. All of whom are human.

alfreD bester is Alive aNd well and livinG in wintERset, iowa.

It's all such a sticky mess.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

A Stir of Bones, by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Viking, 2003, $15.99.

A NEW novel by Hoffman is always a treat, and this first one of hers aimed at the Young Adult market is no exception. And before I tell you anything else, let me assure you that adult readers will get just as much pleasure from it as they have from her books marketed to the adult audience.

A Stir of Bones is a stand-alone prequel to two of those adult novels, *A Red Heart of Memories* and *Past the Size of Dreaming*. It's the story of Susan Backstrom, the perfect teenager. She's bright, blonde, and beautiful, lives in a big gorgeous house, and has loving, attentive parents. Too attentive, when it comes to her father.

No, he doesn't physically molest her. He simply insists on controlling every minute aspect of her life to make sure that she really is the perfect teenager. When she isn't — and her failings are so infinitesimally small that in any other household they would barely register on parental radar — he punishes her mother.

But because Susan is conditioned to not let any of her inner turmoil show, and because she knows what her father will do if she ever tells anyone about what life is really like inside that perfect house they live in, she seems standoffish to her peers and (even away from the watchful eyes of her father) is never included in the activities and conversations that usually fill a teenager's life.

Her rebellions have always been small and invisible to her father's intense scrutiny. Until the day she overhears a conversation in the public library that gains her some new friends, including a ghost. Unfortunately, it also puts her in a world of trouble when her father finds out, and not even the haunted house where she and her new friends

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

go after school can be a safe haven.

This is a wonderful book — not so much a coming-of-age story as a daring-to-be-one's-self story. And even with its dark underpinnings, it's chockful of magic and delight.

Hoffman is one of those authors that, while she certainly appeals to a genre audience — at least one with an interest in contemporary fantasy — is also an excellent ambassador to the wider world of literature beyond our few shelves of the bookstore. Her books are the kind that I can hand to my friends who only read mainstream and they are immediately enamored — not realizing that they're reading a fantasy, for all the fantastical goings on in their pages.

Now I don't say this because I feel that we (in the genre) need to gain validity from those readers who live in the bigger city beyond the few blocks and alleyways we've either staked out as our own, or that have been left to us. That's not important. What's in the book is important. And that it reach as many readers as possible, because that's why writers write. They want to communicate to as many people as possible.

So I love it when I find an author like Hoffman who is as gifted as she is at expressing what I love about fantasy (the sense of wonder) but doesn't shy away from real-life concerns while doing so. Hoffman shines a light into the darkness and finds treasures there as well as deeper shadows.

Custer's Last Jump and Other Collaborations, by Howard Waldrop & Leigh Kennedy, Steven Utley, Buddy Saunders, George R.R. Martin, Bruce Sterling & A. A. Jackson IV, Golden Gryphon, 2003, $24.95.

Apparently, Howard Waldrop has been holding back these stories from the various collections of his that have appeared over the years, in the hope that one day they could all be together in a single volume.

Well, that day's come, and what a treasure trove they prove to be.

The presentation alone is fascinating, as each story has an introduction by Waldrop covering how he met his collaborator and some history of the story's genesis, followed by the story itself, and then an afterward by the collaborator, either building upon, or sometimes refuting Waldrop's facts. Though truthfully, there's little of the latter, as Waldrop is noted for keeping copious notes on his stories.

Also appearing throughout the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

volume are a series of short, somewhat tongue-in-cheek essays on the art of collaboration.

All of it makes for compelling reading, building up a portrait of Waldrop and whetting one's appetite for the main course, which is the fiction itself. And while I understand Waldrop wanting to bring them together in one collection, these stories are too good to have languished uncollected for so long.

They range from alternative histories like the title story (written with Steven Utley) and "One Horse Town" (a take on Homer written with Leigh Kennedy) through to "The Latter Days of the Law" (an eleventh-century detective story set in Heian Japan with Bruce Sterling) which I believe is original to the collection.

I've always been a sucker for the short story form, especially when handled as well and as imaginatively as they are here by Waldrop and his collaborators. And since you're a reader of this magazine of short stories (where you were momentarily distracted by this column), I'm sure you'll enjoy them as much as I did.

The Faeries of Spring Cottage, by Terri Windling & Wendy Froud, Simon & Schuster, 2003, $21.

Of all the denizens of Faerie, surely one of the most charming has to be Sneezlewort Rootmuster Rowanberry Boggs the Seventh, a hawthorn root faery with a heart as large as the sky and an unfortunate penchant for getting into trouble. More familiarly known as Sneezle, he has already had two big adventures, told to us in a combination of words and pictures by Terri Windling and Wendy Froud in *A Midsummer Night's Faery Tale* and *The Winter Child*.

Windling's prose has all the delight and resonance of a tried-and-true fairy tale, the kind of storytelling that is simple but sometimes soars, and always holds the promise of some greater mystery lying just beyond the edges of the words. Froud supplies the wondrous dolls that illustrate the tale, while her husband Brian built the sets and directed the photographs that bring them to life.

This time out, the trouble that always seems to find Sneezle takes him from the hidden reaches of Old Oak Wood into the world of mortals, where all is not as it should be. Accidentally hitching a ride in a child's knapsack, he finds himself trapped in a cottage in the human world, and surrounded by unfamiliar dangers. There is a cat that would

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dearly like to have him for its dinner. But worse, the mistress of the house has had to leave the cottage and all the brownies and good folk are going feral from her neglect, turning into nasty bogles.

Half based on folklore (with appearances by traditional Faerie denizens such as a Billy Blind) and half born from the fertile imaginations of author and illustrator, there are no seams showing where one source ends and another begins. Readers can simply immerse themselves in this self-contained world of Faerie with the sure knowledge that they are in skilled and capable hands.

The Faeries of Spring Cottage is undoubtedly aimed at younger readers, but the writing hasn't been dumbed down in the least, and older lovers of a well-told fairy tale and British folklore will find much to engage them. The noted folklorist and author K. M. Briggs would have been charmed at how Windling and Froud are building on tradition. I know that I am.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

"Down, boy! That is, overruled."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

The Wizard Hunters, by Martha Wells, Eos, 2003, $24.95.

Joss Whedon, The Genius Behind Buffy, by Candace Havens, BenBella Books, 2003, $15.95.

The War of the Flowers, by Tad Williams, DAW, 2003, $24.95.

I DON'T know if I'm typical among genre readers — or even if there *is* a typical genre reader — but I've learned over the years that I respond slowly to change, and that my frequent first reaction, when offered one, is "No." It's usually followed by thought, which goes against the very good advice of "Brain first, mouth later." These last few months have seen some changes in my life, and I'd like to mention the first one here.

The biggest of the changes in my life: Bakka Books, the place I worked at part-time for years, managed for years, and worked at part-time after the children were born, underwent its first change of hands in over twenty-two years; I've been there for seventeen of them, first at the original Queen St. location, and then at the new location on Yonge. John Rose has always been a bit unusual. When I started there, Tanya Huff had just sold her first couple of short stories to *Amazing*, and was rewriting the novel that became *Child of the Grove*. John, who never read a lot of fantasy — he was a great horror and sf reader — was entirely supportive of her work, and later of mine. Cory Doctorow and Nalo Hopkinson also worked there during my tenure, and Robert J. Sawyer worked there before I joined on.

The plethora of writers that Bakka fostered speaks to the fact that the store itself was a special place, and John really encouraged us all in our writing, diverse as it was; it makes the store unusual, as far as I know. Both the publishing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

world and the store itself underwent many changes over the two decades, as sf became more and more popular and more readily available in other bookstores. The opening of the superstores also made things more challenging, but during this period John continued to run the store, and to oversee us all with quirky humor and real dedication.

I'll miss him. The new owner, Ben Freiman, is very much a genre reader, and purchased the store partly because he thinks of Bakka as an institution or a landmark of Canadian sf which he wished to continue. He's the age I was when I first started, and has that youth and dedication going for him. I think the store will do well in his hands. But it's still a big change for me.

So, in the hectic upswing of change, of moving shelves and rearranging the old into something newer, I did what I often do: I retreated into the familiar and the private: I read. It has been said elsewhere, by other authors, that reading *for comfort* seems an intellectual affront, a way of somehow supporting the status quo. Let me cause affront, then. Or perhaps, let me point out that no single reader reads for *one* reason, and one alone; that enjoyment comes in different stripes and flavors; that the thrill of the new and the disturbing is one of them, but that the affirmation of things hopeful or things beautiful is not, in and of itself, a guarantee of retreading the same comfortable ground or turning the brain *off*. It's simply — for me — a way of finding some part of myself when the ground beneath my feet shifts in a way that the Richter scale wouldn't track.

Martha Wells is new to this column, although she is not new to the field. Her first novel, *The Element of Fire*, was a fabulous first book, and she followed it with a number of others, *City of Bones*, *The Death of the Necromancer*, and *Wheel of the Infinite*. If you haven't read Wells yet, you've missed one of the more graceful wordsmiths currently writing fantasy, and if you have, you're in for a treat. *The Wizard Hunters* is the first in an ostensibly new trilogy. The trilogy itself is new, but there are familiar characters who make cameo appearances, and the tone of the novel is very much like her earlier books: smart, witty, and highly entertaining.

Tremaine Valiarde is a young woman who is searching for a way to commit suicide that will not be noticed as such — she's not a woman who wants her death to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cause damage to anyone else, but also not a woman who feels that her life has either meaning or value in the grander scale of things. And the scale of things is grand: the Gardier have declared war on the city she calls home, and with it, death has followed, taking from her everything that could be considered family. All she has as reminder is a toy that her uncle once gave her — a sphere that comforted her when she was lonely or sad.

In another land, and in another place, two men, Ilias and Giliead, who are not bent on death — but rather, on protection — are facing the same enemies, the deadly and mysterious Gardier. These men fear and loathe wizards, and with just cause. When fishing boats and merchant ships go missing, they set off on a mission to discover whether or not wizardry has indeed reared its ugly head, and they find out quickly that, in spite of earlier sacrifices, it *has*.

I have a weakness for clever dialogue. I have a weakness for wry observation. I have a weakness for clever *people*. Wells delivers all of these things, but without obvious flash; it's so much a part of her writing that you couldn't separate the two without stripping the book of words.

When Tremaine and her guardian Gerard discover that the research being done by Tremaine's dead uncle was in fact a complicated translocation spell, the two worlds begin to merge. Wells handles this with aplomb — of course — and with a real sense of the strangeness of the clash of different cultures. Alliances and friendships are made, and, in the end, Tremaine discovers exactly what the significance of her uncle's gift was.

I won't spoil it. But I will say this: although *Wizard Hunters* is the first of three, it doesn't end on a cliffhanger, and by the end of the book, enough is known that it changes the way war will be dealt with in future novels. It won't rip your heart out and stomp it flat — but it will entertain, amuse, and move you, which is high praise indeed.

Candace Havens's book reads as if it were a long and well-researched interview with Joss Whedon. His obviously clever take on his own work (see above re: my weakness for clever people) informs almost every page, and his wry observations about his own life do likewise. He is up front about his intentions for *Buffy*, and speaks quite openly about his experiences with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the movie — and with movies in general, and the place that a writer occupies in Hollywood in particular (not quite the slime on the bottom of people's shoes, but pretty darned close). These provide some insight into what drives him, but he takes no pains to hide it; he is not entirely diplomatic.

Havens is clearly a fan of both Joss Whedon and of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and she's had the opportunity either to talk to the cast of the three shows Whedon has worked on for television (*Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*), or to read a lot of interviews written by other people who have. It's not clear which of the two is true, but she integrates the information she's pulled together well, and the whole of the book is almost seamless. Given that there are academics who have made *Buffy* their focus, one might expect that the book would be dry; it's anything but.

Whedon comes from a television writers' family. But it was movies that were his first love, and Havens has access to the woman he credits with much of his focus: a professor at Wesleyan.*

She, too, has something to say about his work, and again, Havens inserts the professor's comments throughout. It's an interesting viewpoint, and one of the few that I hadn't encountered before.

If you're looking for a critical commentary, this is not the book for you. The use of the word Genius in the title sort of gives that away. But if you appreciate *Buffy*, you'll find it interesting.

Toward the book's end, Havens touches on *Firefly*, the only television project of Whedon's so far to fail. She mentions the difficulty with the original pilot that didn't air when it *should have* , although she quotes Gail Berman's public take on the matter.

Because of Whedon's work, I was sort of curious about *Firefly* — but having been told it was a Western in space, I was also a bit reluctant to watch it. One of these years, I'll forgive myself. I fell in love with the first episode I managed to catch, and then went back and watched everything else; I am so much a *Firefly* fan now that even though it's off the air, I still hand people the original pilot (not the first aired episode) when they display even a passing interest.

**Joe Reed, husband of longtime* F&SF *contributor Kit Reed and a professor of film studies at Wesleyan, was not consulted, but he is proud to have spotted a character in the show with traits that strongly resemble his. —ed.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The War of the Flowers, by Tad Williams, is another departure. If Williams can be accused of anything, it is not repeating himself. *Tailchaser's Song* was a *Watership Down* for cats (and cat lovers), *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* was a wonderfully characterized classic fantasy, and *Otherland* was a foray into the realms of virtual reality. Williams's newest novel is a standalone, and it takes place — or rather begins — in the here and now, with the midlife crisis of a thirty-year-old musician who never quite made it big.

Theo Vilmos is part of a band. This is nothing new to him. But his girlfriend is expecting their first child, and that *is*. Things spiral out of control very quickly — or out of Theo's control — and his life begins to lurch from one crisis to another. In the hands of a lesser writer, this would be an almost unforgiveable amount of pointless pathos — but in the hands of Williams, with his attention to detail and his ability to make Theo's pain and confusion real, it's perfect. In the end, left with nothing, Theo retreats to a log cabin to rethink and reinvent his life.

And his life *is* reinvented, but not in the manner he intended — because, in spite of the fact that he's a passive drifter, he's also sane. Two unexpected visitors make their way to his retreat — the first a walking corpse, and the second a very short, very feisty...faery. The first convinces Theo to listen to the second, and when she opens some sort of odd hole in the air, he jumps through and finds himself in a very different universe.

The pastoral, medieval world of the Faerie is not for Williams. His Faerie are peopled by a diversity of creatures — none of them human — and a power structure that resembles something Victorian, if you don't count cave trolls, little flying faeries, and warring, fractious Faerie clans. He carries with him the diaries of his dead uncle, Eamonn Dowd, a man who claims to have visited these lands, and, accompanied by the diminutive and demanding Applecore, the winged creature who saved his life, he begins his travels through that land, hunted from the start by unknown adversaries who clearly don't have his welfare at heart.

On the road, he discovers a lot about himself, makes friends, and even begins to recover from his grief at the loss of his previous life — but not without cost, and not without confronting the weaknesses that led to the disasters of his other life. As

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the best of fantasy novels, Theo Vilmos discovers who he is, and what he is, and learns in the end what bravery, that antiquated out-of-date concept, truly means.

For readers who adore de Lint's contemporary fantasy, this is a must read; for people who have appreciated anything else that Williams has done, this is also highly recommended. I'm not sure what Williams will try next — I'd love to see what he'd do with a high tech sf setting — but it's clear that wherever he's going, it's worth following.

BooksNow
To order these books, (24hrs, 365 days) please call (800)266-5766 (Ext. 9500) or visit us at www.clicksmart.com/fsf

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH WE'RE GOING TO CELEBRATE our fifty-fourth anniversary and we're happy to tell you that a lot of familiar names will be on hand:

After too long an absence, Joe Haldeman returns to *F&SF* with four short novels — let no one say you're not getting your money's worth from our magazine when we can provide you with four novels in less than ten pages!

Terry Bisson provides the cover story with "Almost Home," a vintage fantasy about airplanes and friendship.

Gene Wolfe's latest story, "Hunter Lake," is an uncanny and unsettling tale that's hard to forget.

We also expect to bring you a new science column by Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty, Lucius Shepard's thoughts on *The Matrix*, and stories by Jerry Oltion, Fred Chappell, Dale Bailey, and Robert Reed.

When we return with our December issue, we'll have Michael Reaves's first new story for us in several decades, as well as M. Rickert's latest fantasy and probably R. Garcia y Robertson's new Markovy story. Other goodies awaiting us include stories by Charles Coleman Finlay, Nancy Etchemendy, Michael Shea, and Chet Williamson. Subscribe now so you won't miss an issue!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Esther Friesner's most recent books include E. Godz, *written in collaboration with Robert Asprin, and the latest "Chicks in Chainmail" anthology,* Turn the Other Chick *(due out soon). Her recent contributions to our pages include "Why I Want to Come to Brewer College" (Sept. 2002) and "Just Another Cowboy" (April 2002). If you recall those memorable stories, you might expect her new one to be in a humorous vein. If so, you would be right, and that vein is ye olde jugular.*

I Killed Them in Vegas

By Esther M. Friesner

I'VE JUST STAGGERED through the nine o'clock show and I'm back in my dressing room when Morrie comes in. The postman always rings twice, but Morrie doesn't even bother to knock. Morrie's my agent, *a.k.a.* That Bloodsucking Leech. I like that in a guy. Ba-dum-DUM.

"Kris, baby, what in hell *was* that out there?" Morrie says, homing in on the nearest piece of furniture and sitting down without looking where he's planting that fat ass of his. "You *died*, man! You fucking *died*!"

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Oh, *now* you're funny?" Morrie runs one hand through his thinning hair, accidentally yanking a few strands out of that pathetic little ponytail he wears. Why doesn't he just have someone tattoo GEEK on his forehead? "I got news for you, man: You're a little too late."

"This is news?" I reply. "The late Kris Spiridion, that's me." I give him the Punchline Smile, the one that's usually the turning point of my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

routine, the moment when no matter how cold the audience reaction has been up till then, they all wake up and laugh.

It works about as well on Morrie as it did on the zombie-wannabes out there tonight.

Morrie shakes his head. "Kris," he says. "Kris, Kris, Kris, what is your problem? Fear of success? Come on, you can tell me; it's nothing to be ashamed of, it's a very common psychological condition."

A common psychological condition. Right. Meaning that the little chippie Morrie is presently *shtupping* read an article about it in *Cosmopolitan*.

"Look, Morrie," I say. "I don't have a problem, okay? Everyone has a bad night now and then. It's par for the course. *Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*." It's a cheap shot, quoting Horace in a crowded dressing room, trotting out the old Classical education, but it's the one thing I have always been able to count on when I want Morrie to *shuttus* the hell *uppus*.

Tonight it doesn't work. Figures.

"Huh? What's *that* supposed to mean?" Morrie demands. Usually, when I bop him over the head with a Latin tagline, he just nods and tries to look smart, like he knows exactly what I'm talking about. Then he changes the subject faster than a crooked CEO at a stockholders' meeting. "Stop being such a fucking snob, Kris; you know I don't speak French."

I also know when I'm beat. "What it means, Morrie, is 'Even good old Homer nods off from time to time.'"

"Well, sure he does. All those pork chops Marge feeds him, no wonder. But what's *The Simpsons* got to do with you?"

Oy, Morrie. Kill me now. Oh. Wait. Never mind.

I sigh and say: "Not a thing. I'm just saying that tonight I came onstage with the deck stacked against me. Did you get a load of the act I had to follow? Some bimbo who stole Roseanne's old Domestic Goddess bit, only she spruced it up with a couple of SUV gags and some crap about the Zone Diet. The skank couldn't find 'original' in the dictionary, but that's okay by the bozos out front because she's a gorgeous blond with big tits who also couldn't find a working bra in *Victoria's Secret*. Every time she slams a punchline she jumps up and down, so she looks like she's packing two sacks of mozzarella cheese in an earthquake!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mmmmmm," says Morrie. "Cheese." And this dreamy smile transforms him so he no longer looks like a toad. Now he's a *horny* toad. "Nice kid, I gave her one of my cards. Shows a lot of promise."

"Is that what she was showing? Once you get her to sign on, you can book her as the only broad in the business with *three* big boobs on her chest." I expect Morrie to get mad and storm out of my dressing room. In fact, I'm banking on it.

Banking's not what it used to be. I'm old enough to remember when they used to give you a free toaster or a broiler oven or even an electric blanket for opening up an account, instead of just crappy interest rates and sappy kittens-and-daisies check patterns. Shoot, I'm even old enough to remember when you got a personal note of thanks from one of the Medici boys at First Firenze National, though the penalty for early withdrawal in those days was usually a heaping helping of arsenic-and-calamari casserole.

Ba-dum-d — Oh, the hell with it.

"Dude, forget the blonde," Morrie says. Like he could. "You've had bad spots in the lineup before this and still you managed to hold onto the audience. Remember Vegas? Frisco? Atlanta? Chicago? You *killed*, Kris! You totally killed 'em. So how come you had to lay a shit egg tonight of all nights? Tonight when we got the Hollywood suits out there waiting to see your chops?"

"Hey, they don't wear suits and I don't like chops," I say, trying to derail the Little Agent That Could (But Shouldn't). "And I *really* don't like st — "

The bastard doesn't let me finish. He's blinded by the sight of lots and lots of dollar bills growing little cartoon wings and flapping their way back to La-La Land.

"You know how long I have waited for a chance like this?" he shouts at me. "All those years of booking one no-hoper after another, every class clown who ever got the other morons to laugh when he made cole slaw shoot out his nose; every punk who decided he was Noel Coward because he made his granny faint when he said 'Fuck' at the dinner table; every wimpy *zhlub* who thought he was the next Woody Allen because he was short, whiny, and ugly; every corn-fed time-waster who was convinced that if he just kept talking and talking and *talking* about the fine folks out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in Bunghole, West Dakota, that made him the new Garrison Keillor, God spare us all, and *now* — " (Poor son-of-a-bitch is about to pass out if he doesn't catch his breath, but he is by hell going to finish this monster sentence.) " — *now* when I've got my hands on someone with real talent and a fresh act, now you go and choke on me just when success is within my — I mean, *our* grasp? You can't do this to me, Kris! I'll see you dead first!"

Morrie is upset, or he wouldn't leave me alone with a straight-line like that. I show a little class and leave it lie. Sometimes you just gotta let the fish swim around in the barrel, shotgun or no shotgun. It's cruel to take advantage of a man who's not thinking before he speaks, if he's thinking at all.

"Don't blame me for your pipe dreams," I tell him. "The whole Hollywood deal was a no-go from the start and we both know why. Want me to explain it to you one more time, so maybe it'll finally penetrate? Nothing fancy, just a quick round of 'What's Wrong With This Picture.'"

I grab his lapels and yank him to his feet before he can say a word, dragging him to stand beside me at the dressing room mirror. I've been wanting to do this since the moment that big clod sat himself down on my coffin without a by-your-leave. What does he think, it's a prop? Do I look like Carrot Top? As I hoist the mook, his heels smack against the side of the casket, putting an ugly scratch in the finish. Damn. Oh well, I'll have Eric give it a little touchup later. I've got more important things to do, like getting my agent to return an e-mail from Reality.

"There!" I say, holding Morrie by the scruff of the neck and shoving him forward so there is no way he can claim that the greasy smears on the glass are my reflection. The only image the shiny surface reproduces is his own. "Look close, *try* to see Kris Spiridion. Try. Whaddaya see? I'll *tell* you what! You see *bubkes*, is what. And when anyone tries to take a picture of me, or shoot me on film or videotape, whaddaya get? Likewise *bubkes*. I'm as visible as a Republican at a Gay Single Mothers for Gun Control fundraiser!"

"Yyyyeah." Morrie admits to the truth, but slowly, and only when he gets it shoved in his face. Of course right away, he tries to put his own spin on it. "If you tried what I suggested, put a little more fiber in your diet, I betcha that little problem of yours would — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I jerk Morrie away from the mirror. "Sweetie, cookie, baby, jackass, this is the first time since the reign of Alexander the Great that I've heard anyone refer to my habit of draining the blood of the living as my 'little problem.' More fiber, you want I should get? I don't think Metamucil dissolves real good in A-Positive. The technical reason for why I don't cast a reflection or show up on film is because *I have no soul.* None. Not even a little one. Say it with me: I am the anti-James Brown! Why do you have such a hard time accepting that? I'm a vampire: V like in vein, A like in aorta, M like in my God, that guy who plays Spike on Buffy is hot, P like in pulse, I-R like in I.R.S., E like in the letter that comes after D-is-for-Dracula. Get it? Got it? I am a vampire, a heartless, pulseless, soulless member of the undead!"

I have seen barnacles with less stick-to-it-iveness than my agent. "Kris," he says patiently. "Gahdfahbid I should ever do or say anything to disenfranchise you from your undeadhood. I fully respect your proud heritage as a Post-Interment-American. Okay, a *naturalized* American, but who am I to judge? Do I sound like I come from one of the First Families of Virginia? So you're heartless, pulseless, soulless, fine. You wanna be jobless, too? Keep screwing up for the Hollywood suits, you'll get there, believe you me."

"Hollywood," I mutter. "Speaking of heartless, pulseless and soulless. So whaddaya want out of my afterlife, hanh? That I should wow these Tinseltown *schmucks* so they give us a big, fat sitcom contract?"

"Yes," he says, like it's gonna be a cakewalk. Not that Morrie ever walked past a nice *shtikel* cake in his life.

"Just like that?" I ask. "So say they like my stuff, they make with the contract, I sign on, and we all go out to California — sunny freakin' California, no less! — to shoot this puppy, is that how you see it?"

Again Morrie makes with the cool, serene, I-got-Buddha-on-my-speed-dial "Yes."

"So as long as you're seeing things, Morrie, you mind telling me how in hell you see them *filming* me?"

"Oh," he says. I think he's got it. By George (and Elaine, Jerry, and Kramer), I think he's got it. Finally. Poor bastard looks like all Santa left him in his stocking was a freshly severed foot.

Yum.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Is — is that why you screwed the pooch at the nine o'clock?" he asks. "On purpose, so they wouldn't find out what you really are?"

"Yeah, Morrie, that's why," I say. I feel sorry for him. I can't tell him the real reason I flopped at the nine o'clock — he'd go Dark Ages on my ass if he knew — so I lie like an incumbent rug. "I did it with prior intent and malice aforethought and like that there, so the suits wouldn't give me a second look. Why set myself up for heartbreak? If they liked what they saw and signed me, the truth would come out the minute they rolled tape. Not only would I be fired, I'd be history. I *was* history, one time back during the French Revolution, and believe me, it's not pretty."

"You could always go back to doing live standup," Morrie says. He's an optimist. Any man who used to manage Marcia the Amazing Juggling Cow has to be.

"'Live'?" I echo. "Morrie, right now the only live thing about me is my career. How long you think that'll last if word gets out that I'm undead?"

"Who's gonna let word get out?"

"In *Hollywood*? Please tell me you didn't ask that. Everyone out there's gotta take the E.S.L. test 'cause their native tongue is fluent Gossip. At best — which never happens — I'll lose my audience on the club circuit because I'll have the stench of flop sweat clinging to me like bimbo on a billionaire. At worst I'll spend the rest of my afterlife being dogged by gothgeeks."

"Hey, let's not paint things blacker than we gotta." Morrie smiles. Easy for him; it's not his future we're gambling. "I tell you what, kid: I'm going out there to talk to the suits and convince them to stay for your eleven o'clock show. *You* go out there at eleven and don't hold back. Give it everything you got, straight up. Pull no punchlines, take no prisoners. Either they love you or they hate you. If they hate you, no harm done, back to business as usual, your secret's safe. If they love you — Well, I've been thinking, and you know what? If they love you — I mean really, really *Hollywood* love you — they'll find a way to work around your little, um, substance abuse issue. I mean, if they decide you look like a bigtime money maker, they're not gonna let a little thing like vampirism get in the way; not when there's serious cash at stake."

"You wanna rephrase that?" I suggest, shuddering. "Without the S-word?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Morrie's oblivious. He's fast in the thrall of Hypocrisalia, the Muse of Bullshit. "So whaddaya say, huh? You'll at least *try* at the eleven o'clock? For me?"

I know when I'm beat. "Sure, Morrie, right, yeah, whatever you want."

"Super!" He makes an unprovoked air-kiss strike on both sides of my face, then finishes the job with a finger-pistol shot right for my heart. "You're beautiful, baby! Don't ever change."

Like I could.

Well, at least he's gone. I'm finally alone in my dressing room, alone with my thoughts. Most of them are about Morrie and the Hollywood suits, with some interesting co-star work involving manacles, red hot fireplace pokers, *big* jalapeño peppers, and ferrets with bad attitudes, but business before pleasure. I've got to think about whether or not I'll actually follow through on what I promised Morrie. Do I really give the suits the best I've got or do I take another dive?

The trouble is, I know what I *want* to do: I want to go out there and slay them. I want them to see me, hear me, love me. I want the applause. I want to make *them* want *me*. I can't help it. It's in my blood, you should pardon the expression, and it's been there since back in the days when I actually *had* blood that wasn't lend-lease, back before I called myself Kris Spiridion, back when I first read for the part of Herakles in *The Frogs* and made Aristophanes himself laugh so hard he did a spit-take with a mouthful of retsina.

I want to make them *laugh*.

I want to. I can't. I mean, I *can*, but I don't dare.

Life was complicated enough, but when did death get to be such a hassle? I'm still staring into the empty mirror when Eric comes in.

"Kris, darling!" he cries, grabbing me from the back and giving me a big hug and a kiss that explodes loudly in my right ear. "I saw you out there tonight. You *stank*! I can't tell you what that means to me." He spins me around and gives me a second kiss on the mouth that plumbs the depths of mad passion, blind devotion, and my esophagus. Good thing I no longer need to worry about silly little mortal things like, oh, breathing.

"Um, sure, Eric, sure," I say, as soon as I can, when the only tongue in my mouth in my own. "You know, about tonight — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eric doesn't let me finish. "All those times you said you loved me, I didn't really believe you. I mean, duh! You've been alive for, like forever. How many times have you said you loved anyone and meant it? How could you, knowing they're going to die on you and stuff. But this — ! Man, this, like, so totally proves you really do love me. Wow! Coolness."

He tosses his head back so even the cheap dressing room lights play up his sparkling green eyes, thick black hair, perfect white teeth, skintight leather — Say, is it hot in here? That gorgeous son-of-a-bitch knows how to strut his stuff even when he's standing still, damn it. No surprise: He was working as a part-time model, full-time rentboy when I found him. Being a vampire's mortal slave doesn't pay as well as pouting for the cameras, but it's steadier work and I throw in free dental.

The trouble is, these days it's kind of up for debate as to which one of us is the slave. Ladies, gents, a word of advice that will serve you well: Never play with your food.

The reason I deliberately screwed up out there at the nine o'clock had nothing to do with the suits or the phantom sitcom contract or the fact that I don't show up on film. The *real* reason, like you haven't already guessed it, was Eric. He asked me to throw the show.

Asked? More like told.

I can still see his eyes brimming with tears as he said, "Darling, I know this sounds totally selfish, but I love you *soooo* much and I'm *soooo* scared that if you do go out there and do good they'll take you away to Hollywood and it'll be all over between us and I'll never see you or speak to you again!"

To which I replied: "But Eric, if I go, you come too."

"Well, whoop-de-shit," he said, all of his tears suddenly gone, evaporated in the blast furnace of a blistering pout. "As what? Your accessory? Your boytoy? Your portable honor bar? While all of those sweet young West Coast love monkeys are snuggling up to you at the industry cocktail parties, what do *I* do for small talk?"

Eric's got one hell of a gift for mimicry, even when he's only imitating himself. Before I could blink he'd turned it on full force, making like he had a Black Russian in his right hand and a Blond Airhead at his left elbow. "'Hi, I'm Eric. I'm Mr. Spiridion's Insignificant Other. You're Sarah Michelle Gellar's *crudité* wrangler? Only imported *French* sea salt for her celery stalks? Wow. Oh, you want to know what *I* do? My job? The reason

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for my existence? What goes on my resumé? I get drunk. In every sense of the word.'"

I made a big mistake: I tried reasoning with him. "Baby, you know I don't drink *your* blood anymore. I already did it twice — once when we met and once when we were at that party after the Halloween parade down in the Village — "

I stopped. Even though he was royally pissed at me, Eric and I still exchanged our special smile. I know it sounds goopy, but we always had to do the old blush-wink-grin bit whenever the subject of that post-parade party came up. It was the first event we attended as a couple. We both thought it'd be fun (to say nothing of cheap) if we switched roles for the holiday, so he dressed up as the big, bad vampire and I got to play his boytoy, chewtoy, whatever. We were a real hit with the crowd, to say nothing of being a mutual turn-on and — and —

Well, and I kind of got carried away and bit him. Look, for a vampire, that's always gonna be the number one biggie in the Complete Guide to Carnal Thrills. Everything else we do — and I do mean *everything* — is like drinking your sister through a screen door.

"So anyway — " I went on. "Anyway, I can't bite you again or you'll turn into a vampire. Third time's the charm."

"When did I say I didn't want to become a vampire?" Eric demanded. "It'd be cool!"

"Trust me, it's more like tepid," I told him.

"Why? Because you don't want me to do it? Because you're afraid of being stuck with me for all eternity?" The kid was turning into Snitzilla right before my eyes. "Because if *I* never died, *you* couldn't go shopping for a new coffin-bunny?"

I rolled my eyes. "Eric, I put up a good front, but unnatural existence for untold centuries is *not* the midnight picnic you think. It's like — like living with a raspberry seed permanently stuck between the two front teeth of your soul!" (Hey, I'm a stand-up comedian, not an analogist... metaphorologist...similian...guy who does that kind of A-is-like-B language thing.)

"Yeah, only vampires don't *have* souls!" Eric countered. "So where's that raspberry seed stuck *now*, huh? If eternal existence is such a pain in the ass, how come I don't see you throwing yourself on a shish kebab

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

skewer, or running chest-first into a low-hanging pointy branch, or going out to Sunnydale and looking up Buffy's phone number?"

(You know, I've *tried* to convince Eric that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is not a docudrama. But he just comes back at me with: "Ha! That's what they *wanted* us to believe about about Mulder and Scully too!" so I gave up.)

"Eric, what can I say?" I held up my hands, helpless. "Existence is tenacious. No matter how much I might long for the peace of eternal sleep, there's always something inside me that holds me back from taking the final step into the abyss."

"Abyss, *schmabyss*," Eric replied. "You've got a million excuses for everything. And what do I have? Nothing. Nothing except how much I love you." He started crying again. The kid had flip-top tear ducts!

I don't know what made me give him what he wanted. Maybe it was the tears, maybe it was his simple, passionate declaration of devotion, maybe it was just my own deep, fervent desire *never* to have to hear a word like *schmabyss* uttered again, but I caved. I folded like a lawn chair. I promised Eric I'd throw the show.

But I never promised I'd throw *every* show.

So that's how I wind up here in the dressing room, about to tell Eric I've changed my mind yet again, that I'm not going to screw up the eleven o'clock show the way I botched the nine. This is going to get ugly.

I take a deep breath. Dead man walking.

IT'S HALF PAST eleven and I'm sitting in the open-all-night diner a couple blocks from the comedy club, sucking the insides out of an order of cheese blintzes, when Patsy notices I'm there. Patsy's my favorite waitress and she tells me I'm her favorite customer, but I bet she says that to all the undead. Patsy's a genuine Goth as opposed to a gothgeek, though she's much too much of a Goth to actually *call* herself a Goth because if she did, that would make her a gothgeek instead, if you follow me. I hope you do, because I don't. She explained the whole *megilla* to me once and I still don't get it.

Anyway, Patsy can call herself a cantaloupe for all I care. She's a nice kid and that's what counts in the long run. Believe me, I know from the long run.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hey, Kris," she says, coming over to give me a refill on coffee even though I'm not seated at her station. Tonight she's going for the Classic look: Matte black hair, clothes, shoes, fishnet stockings, everything black, black, black, except the regulation white diner apron and the pink and blue Hello Kitty tattoo high on her right cheekbone. The guy who manages this joint doesn't care how she dresses as long as the Health Department doesn't have an FDA-approved cow. On the graveyard shift, most customers would rather get their coffee poured by Morticia Addams than Britney Spears anyhow.

"What are you doing here?" she asks. "I thought you had a set at the club."

"Mnyeh," I reply. I don't wanna talk about it.

She frowns. Then she happens to notice the flattened blintzes on my plate and she scowls hard enough to turn her tattoo into Hello Kitty Litter. (I chose my seat deliberately when I came in here, avoiding Patsy's station on purpose, knowing that once I gave her my order, she'd refuse to turn it in. Too bad I didn't eat faster and get my waitress to clear the plate before Patsy saw it.) As Eric would say, I am, like, so totally busted.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, eating that?" she demands. "You trying to kill yourself? For real, this time?"

"Patsy, you know all that crap about vampires only surviving on the blood of the living is, okay, crap." (I *told* you I wasn't a similian!) "It was a big stinking lump of Orthodox Sanguinarian propaganda that got spread around in the sixteenth century. Coincidentally, it sprang up right after the Spanish brought chocolate to Europe. You wanna know what *I* think? I think the old vampires started the whole 'Ve nefer dreenk...*wine*' con job to keep the dead-come-lately newbies from muscling in on the hot cocoa supply."

Patsy makes a face. "I'm not talking about you eating *food*, fool; I'm talking about you eating *that* food! Cheese blintzes? You told me you're lactose intolerant. You know you're going to regret it tomorrow. It's damned hard to light a match inside a coffin. Or do you *want* to die in the gas chamber?"

I push the plate away, if only to acknowledge that she's right. It's an empty gesture otherwise, done too late to do me any good, so I also make a mental note to stick a heavy duty air freshener inside my coffin lid before sunrise. "I guess I just wasn't thinking," I say.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah, or else you're thinking too much," she counters. Putting down the coffee pot, she leans across the counter and murmurs, "It's Eric, isn't it?"

I don't know what it is about that simple little question that makes me spill my guts. Maybe it's the way she asks it, like she already knows the answer. Maybe it's how her voice gives away how much she pities me, so much in love with Eric that I'm willing to drop all my dreams just on his say-so. Maybe it's the second question, the one she doesn't ask because she doesn't need to, because I can hear it clear as a bell without her having to put it into words:

Kris...is he really worth it?

Hell of a question. Damned if I know the answer. Damned if I don't, too.

I tell her the whole story, Eric and Morrie and Hollywood suits included. She's a good listener. When I'm done, she says, "Okay, so he said that if you really loved him, you'd blow off the eleven o'clock show entirely, right? Not even show your face, just skip out?"

I nod.

"No matter what that'll do to your career? To your reputation? To your standing as a professional?"

I nod again.

"That's what he said *you'd* do if you really loved him," she says. "So tell me, Kris: What would *he* do if he really loved *you*?"

And there it is. Simple as basic black. Amazing I didn't think of it myself, after having lived this long. Well, that's what I get for sleeping through Intro Philosophy class, though I'm telling you, old man Plato could send *furniture* into hibernation when he got to yammering on about the Perfect State.

Suddenly, everything falls right into place. I'm no longer blinded by lust, hogtied by passion, clotheslined by desire. I know just what I've got to do.

I check the clock and leap to my feet. "All right, I can still make my slot! Great! A couple minutes late, but — " I start fumbling for my wallet to pay the tab, only Patsy leans all the way over and gives me a shove.

"Come back and pay up after," she says. "Now *move* your undead ass!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I race back to the club, getting my game face on, working myself up so I'll give the best performance of my afterlife. I'm halfway there when I check my watch and discover that the diner clock's ten minutes slow. Shit! That means I'm going to be more than just a couple of minutes late. I start praying that Morrie's had a word with the M.C., got him to hold off taking me out of the batting order, as it were, or even persuaded him to shift my act to a later time slot. I start running through some *Sorry I'm late, folks, but a funny thing happened to me on the way to the theater*...material as I sprint through the streets.

I barge into the club the front way instead of by the stage door, to save time. I'm in such a goddam hurry I crash into a busboy. Everyone laughs. Okay, fine, I can use this, work with it, nothing wrong with a little slapstick, some good old-fashioned —

Then I realize that they're not laughing at me.

Someone else is up on the stage, under the lights, taking my time slot. He's wearing a long black cape, an all-black outfit, and he's looking into the audience, giving them the Punchline Smile.

My Punchline Smile: The one I use after I've started the act with a few jokes so unbelievably lame that it's a sure thing some wiseguy out front will holler, "You *suck*!"

Which is when I give them the Smile, the one that shows off my fangs so clearly that you can't miss them even if you're that guy in the Coke-bottle bifocals all the way back in the cheap seats. I flash the fangs and I say something like "You got that right," or "Well, duh!" or "You must work for the government, Einstein!" and that's it, that's the moment when I segue into the *You Think* You *Got Problems! Try Being Undead in This City/Economy/Dating Scene/Administration!* routine. That's when they all fall right into my hands.

Only tonight they've fallen into the wrong hands. Someone else is up there, wrapped in one of *my* spare capes, using *my* material, showing off a pair of plastic neck-jabbers that are an embarrassment to the whole Haemophagic-American community and getting *my* laughs doing it.

"Eric, you son-of-a-bitch!" I scream from the back of the house. "So that's why you didn't want me to go on!"

He freezes in the spotlight, looking like a cross between Bambi and Count Chocula. I go bounding up the aisle, right past the table where

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Morrie and the Hollywood suits are still laughing over the act Eric swiped wholesale from me.

What follows next is a blur. I hear myself calling Eric every name in the really filthy book. He's giving back as good as he gets, though the fake fangs kind of get in the way of bad language and good diction. The first two rows of tables are drenched in spit, but they don't care: They're laughing too hard at what sounds to them like just another lovers' quarrel gone ballistic. It's always funny when it's someone else's dirty laundry flapping in the breeze.

Finally Eric yanks out his fangs and stamps on them. "You *moron!*" he shouts at me. "Do you even realize why I did this? It's for *you*, dammit! You've got a solid gold act and a cardboard cutout delivery! You're killing your own material. Yeah, they laugh okay, but not as much as they *would* if they ever heard your act performed like it deserves. You are, like, *so* dead that if someone jabbed a wooden stake through your heart no one could tell the difference. You make Dick Cheney on tranqs look like Robin Williams on double-shot espressos!"

"And you make a horse's ass look good by comparison!" I yell back. "The funniest thing you ever said in your life was '*I* am an *ac*-torrrrr!'"

"Oh, like *you* are?" Eric sneers.

"Every time I fake one with you, baby. Every single time."

Eric kicks over the high stool they leave onstage in case one of us wants somewhere to leave a cup of water or a prop for the act or something. He kicks it so hard that one of the legs splinters off.

"Man, you are *such* a glory-hog!" he rants, stamping his foot. "Would it kill you to give me a break? Oh, wait: There's only one thing that *will* kill you."

And the little turd makes a grab for the busted-off piece of wood from the prop stool. The audience goes wild. It's like they're all caught up inside an Anne Rice novel ghost-written by Judy Tenuta.

I go wild, too. Eric's blatant treachery turns me inside out, burns me worse that a thousand sunrises. All of a sudden I realize how much his professions of love *really* meant. There's only room for one person in his heart, which means he won't hesitate an instant before ramming a stake through mine.

The hell he will.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I grab hold of his cape and jerk back hard. Eric chokes and pratfalls right on his tight little butt. His leather pants make a whoopee-cushion sound on the stage floor. The crowd applauds. I pick up him by the throat with one hand, grab the stake with the other, and I give the paying customers the Smile.

"Don't worry, folks," I tell them, holding the stake on high. "I've been doing standup so long, the only thing that can kill me's a *schtick* through the heart." Ba-dum-flumpf. They groan. I don't blame them; that one needs a rewrite.

A rewrite...

Slowly the full picture dawns on me (and trust me, that is *not* an image we vampires find appealing). All those things Eric said, the stuff about how I've got a great act but I shouldn't be the one doing the delivery, now I know exactly how he saw our future: The suits would fall in love with *him* tonight, not me. They'd give him *my* sitcom and Morrie wouldn't do a thing, except maybe get Eric's signature on an exclusive contract so fast it'd leave scorch marks on the paper. Everyone would be a lot happier: Eric's prettier than me, he'll attract a bigger, younger viewer demographic, and it's no problem at all getting *his* shiny, happy face on film.

And after the pixie dust settles, where does that leave me?

As the writer. Eric's writer. Eric's *Hollywood* writer, dung-beetle to his butterfly.

That *bastard*.

My eyes go red. Before, I was only going to smack the little shit upside the head with the stake he meant for me, but now — now it's out of my hands. I'm no longer responsible for my own actions. I have not been so consumed by primal, berserk, ravening bloodlust since the Dodgers hauled their sorry turncoat asses out of Brooklyn. A captive of my own rage, I feel all rational thought slip from my grasp like quicksilver as my thirst for vengeance swiftly transforms itself into a more basic thirst. I cannot think beyond the moment, and the moment screams REVENGE! Did this miserable mortal creature in my grasp actually have the brazen, boldfaced temerity to deceive me, defy me, deride me, to try to turn me into a — a — a *writer*? Consequences be damned, I will make him *pay*.

Just before I plunge my fangs into Eric's throat, I look out at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

audience and cheerfully say, "Remember, folks, don't drink and drive. Flying's another story."

I'm still draining him dry as a week-old bagel when the suits storm the stage and get me to sign the sitcom deal while the rest of the audience continues giving me a standing O.

So I see by the trades that the network's anted up for an additional thirteen episodes of *Byte Me!* (The wacky adventures of a couple of computer nerds who just happen to be vampires.) This, after the whole first season went by without my face ever showing up once on the TV screens of our devoted fans. You'd think that'd be a problem, but no. Morrie was right: Love will find a way, and so will Hollywood, when there's enough money involved.

C.G.I. technology...who knew? It's not like I've got Gollum on my speed-dial. (I mean, he's cute, but not my type in any sense of the word.) It's been a long time since I've been able to check out my reflection in a mirror, but Morrie assures me that my image looks just like me, plus it gives the show its special "hook," having the two nerd vampires show up as computer-generated characters.

Well, that and the fact that we made the mistake of storing our coffins in the basement of an all-girls high school in Malibu.

And that all the girls are Phys. Ed. Majors with a required course in Advanced Trampoline.

And that some of them are exchange students from Sweden.

And that Eric's character's a virgin.

Ah, yes: Eric. He's happy now. He finally got his big break in showbiz and all it took to seal the deal was giving up his immortal soul and making a full-time commitment to draining the blood of the living. No wonder he and Morrie get along so well.

As for me, I'm happy too, though I gotta tell you, some of these scripts they give me, I wouldn't use 'em to line a hamster cage. The suits *said* they liked my original act, but once they got me out here, they changed everything. They're downplaying the whole vampire angle and playing up Eric's virginity like he never did, and as for any mention of us being gay? Fahgeddaboudit. Not until *Will and Grace* goes off the air or *Ellen* comes back from the dead. Plus they're dicking around with my image so I'm

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gradually morphing into the lovechild of Brad Pitt and Russell Crowe. I don't know how they're gonna deal with it when I have to show up in the flesh for the Emmys, but I'm sure they'll think of something.

Hell, I'm *terrified* they'll think of something.

Maybe I oughta just throw over the whole sitcom package, ditch the world of Recycled Hijinks Ensue and go back to New York, back to doing standup, back to being my own corpse. Shoot, I'm already booked to host *Saturday Night Live*, if the Irony Police don't stop me. Once I'm back on the Right Coast, why couldn't I just stay there?

I could do it, I could get back in the game. All that stuff I told Morrie about how it'd be impossible to go back to doing standup, that was just smoke and mirrors to cover up the whole *mishegaas* with Eric. Why should I care if I do pull in the gothgeeks and the *Byte Me!* groupies and the trendoids who'll go see anyone whose name they recognize from *People* magazine? An audience is an audience, as the Christian said to the lions. All I need is some new material. Hey, how's this sound for openers?

Good evening, folks, I just flew back from L.A. and boy, are my wings tired. A funny thing happened to me on the way to the theater tonight: A guy with two hundred proof breath staggers up to me and says he hasn't had a bite in days, and so — No, I didn't bite him. I nefer dreenk...winos. (Ba-dum-DUM!) Hey, anyone from Jersey in the audience? Sorry to hear it.

Just kidding, I love Jersey. It's good to know there's somewhere worse to spend your daylight hours than a coffin. In fact, I love you all so much, I could just eat you up. So lie back, push away that garlic pizza, pull down those turtleneck sweaters, relax and enjoy the show.

Oh, and don't forget to nip your waitress.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gene Mirabelli is the author of five novels and numerous stories, articles, and reviews, yet he thinks he might be the least known man of letters since Hawthorne (who?). Mr. Mirabelli's first novel, The Burning Air, *was published in 1959 and he taught in the graduate writing program at the State University of New York at Albany for a long stretch. Now retired, he lives in upstate New York. His first venture into the realm of science fiction doesn't reinvent the time-travel story in the way that, say, Gregory Benford's* Timescape *did, but it's a fresh and delightful tale we're delighted to bring you.*

The Only Known Jump Across Time

By Eugene Mirabelli

1

THE ONLY KNOWN JUMP across time produced by an apparatus, a so-called time machine, took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in May of 1928. The people who performed the brief transit were Lydia Webster Chase and Enzo Augusto Capellino.

2

Enzo Capellino was a tailor and Lydia Chase was the daughter of Prescott Chase, a retired professor of botany at Harvard University. Enzo and Lydia knew of each other only because her father had his shirts and suits made in Capellino's shop. One day in 1908, while being fitted for a summer-weight linen suit jacket, Professor Chase happened to make small talk about gardening. Now, young Enzo Capellino was an avid gardener and he invited the professor to walk through the sunny

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

patch he cultivated behind his shop. Old Professor Chase was delighted by this tangled paradise of Sicilian fruit trees, grapevines, and vegetables, and in return he invited Mr. Capellino to visit his garden, a half-acre of flower beds, cool moss and ferns and fish pools, gravel walks and willow trees which lay behind his large square house on Kirkland Street.

In the years that followed, the elderly professor and the young tailor visited each other's gardens once every June, exchanging seeds and cuttings. A certain decorum clothed these visits, partly because Professor Chase had been taught to treat social inferiors with polite formality and partly because Mr. Capellino had been taught to show deference to his elders, and the professor was clearly a generation older.

3

In May of 1927 the professor's daughter, Lydia Chase, visited the tailor's shop for the first time, bringing with her the measurements for her father's summer shirts. Enzo looked up from his cutting table that day and saw a tall, slender woman dressed in white, a beautiful woman with a distracted look about her. She moved with an elegant awkwardness, as if — as if — as if, he thought, she were a large-winged crane or snowy egret, a creature who would be superbly graceful the moment she took flight, for air would be her natural element, not earth. Enzo himself was so distracted by her that it was not until after she left that he looked at the measurements she had given him. He saw that they were much shrunken from a year ago.

Miss Chase returned to Mr. Capellino's shop a few weeks later to pick up the shirts. Enzo understood from the terribly diminished measurements that the professor, her father, was very sick. He wanted to solace Miss Chase, who was clearly even more distracted than before, but found that all he could say was, "I hope Professor Chase is well." To which Lydia replied, "Thank you." She flushed slightly, hesitated as if to say something more, then turned and left the shop, bumping ever so slightly into the door on her way out.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

4

Prescott Chase, Harvard Professor Emeritus of botany, veteran of the Civil War, died in December of 1927 at the age of eighty-four, and was buried next to his wife and son in Mount Auburn Cemetery. Prescott's old friends had already died or were ailing and housebound, and Christ Church, though small, looked quite empty. Lydia's women friends attended the service, as did five of the professor's former students and the President of the Charles Downing Horticulture Society. After the service, as Lydia followed the coffin past the empty pews, she noticed a solitary man standing halfway to the back of the church. He was of medium height, or somewhat shorter, and he was gazing at her with enormously sad, sympathetic eyes. It was not until she was home and had closed the door behind her that Lydia remembered him as the tailor, Mr. Capellino, upon which she suddenly burst into tears.

5

Lydia's friends visited her regularly that December, but by the last week of January, 1928, the only visitor she had was a librarian from Harvard who had asked to examine her father's books and papers to see if there was anything valuable she could donate to the university. She was lonely.

6

The figure of Mr. Capellino refused to abandon Lydia's memory, so in February she visited his shop. He was even shorter and darker than she had recalled, and the shop more cluttered. But when he stepped forward to greet her he smiled, his face lighting up so much at the sight of her that she forgot what she had planned to say and fumbled with pleasantries about the weather. As for the weather, sleet and freezing rain had kept everyone else at home, so the shop was empty. Lydia recovered herself and said she hoped Mr. Capellino could help her choose a necktie as a gift. Enzo explained that he had no neckties.

"No neckties?" she echoed, glancing about with a worried look.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Please make yourself comfortable, Miss Chase," he said. "I'll make tea."

Lydia sat in a chair beside the cutting table and removed her gloves. Enzo brought out a ceramic tea service whose brightly painted teapot was in the shape of a hen.

"My mother died many years ago and my father needed somebody, needed me, to take care of the house, take care of him and the house," Lydia blurted out, as if she had been asked.

"I understand," Enzo replied gently, pouring tea. "I was eighteen when my father died. I had to take over the shop to help my mother and to make dowries for my two younger sisters. My sisters married seventeen years ago, and my mother died three years ago, and here I am today."

Lydia nervously twisted her gloves in her lap and wondered what to say next. "You garden on summer evenings," she ventured.

"And I read on winter nights," Enzo said.

After a moment she asked, "Have you ever wished to escape time, Mr. Capellino, so as to change your life?"

"Often," he said, looking up at her.

"Would you change things in the past or the future?"

"You cannot change the past, only the future," he said.

"Somebody should build a time machine to go to the future," Lydia said, smiling for the first time.

Enzo was enchanted by her smile. "I will do that," he told her.

7

One afternoon Enzo looked up from his jumbled cutting table and there was Lydia, standing tall in the middle of the shop. Snowflakes melting on her black cloche hat and on her long black coat gave her the appearance of — the appearance of — Yes! Enzo thought, the appearance of the night sky clothed with stars. She asked Mr. Capellino for help in choosing a pair of gentleman's leather gloves. He explained that he didn't carry gloves. "No gloves?" Lydia said, looking about vaguely.

"No one will be coming here in this blizzard," Enzo said, quickly bringing out a painted coffee pot shaped like a rooster. "Please make yourself comfortable."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He was pouring coffee from the brightly colored pot when Lydia asked him, "Have you thought about the time machine?"

"I've thought about it for years."

"How would it work?" she asked.

"Einstein has written about the fabric of space-time," he began.

"Einstein? The fabric of space-time?"

Enzo set down the pot. "Those are his words, yes. And I wondered about this fabric. He said it was curved, and I know something about fitting pieces of flat fabric over a curved surface. And as I thought about it, evening after evening, I came to see that the past is like a tightly woven bolt of cloth, endlessly wide and endlessly long and endlessly deep."

"And the future?"

"The future is being woven in this passing instant, right now. When we say *now* we refer to the edge where the threads are being brought together. A time machine will permit us to get just ahead, just a wee bit ahead, just a thread's breadth ahead of now. And once there, we can weave life any which way we want, to please ourselves." He had never felt so confident and he broke into a smile.

Lydia had discovered she deeply enjoyed talking this kind of nonsense with Mr. Capellino. "And what would it take to leap the distance of one thread ahead of now?" she asked with a smile.

"A lightning bolt," he said, laughing for the delight he saw in her face.

Lydia stayed talking with Enzo rather longer than the last visit and enjoyed herself more than she had in a long time.

8

The next time Lydia and Enzo met, a gust of wind blew Lydia's umbrella inside out just as she came in the door. She was gasping for breath and her face was drenched with rain. Enzo produced a dazzling white handkerchief and dabbed gently at her cheeks, but after three dabs the couple became embarrassed at how close they were to each other. Abruptly Enzo busied himself in fixing her umbrella while Lydia composed herself. She asked did he have any books, and Enzo laughed and answered no, no books, only men's clothing.

"The man who came from Harvard is cataloging my father's library

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and putting *all* the books in order," she said, looking around as if seeing the shop for the first time. "He's very good at making things neat and orderly. Perhaps you could use — "

But Enzo interrupted to tell her, "They are like diamonds in your hair, those raindrops." That was the first time he had ever said anything like that, and he was as surprised as Lydia by his boldness. He went off and returned with a tray and two glasses. "A little sweet wine from before Prohibition," he explained.

Lydia sipped from her glass, coughed and put her hand to her chest as the wine went down. "How would one get a lightning bolt?" she asked.

"I'll make one."

"Is that possible?"

"Yes, certainly. Before my parents immigrated to this country they lived in Palermo and saw Augusto Righi demonstrate his lightning machine at the University. My father was very impressed by Righi. He saw the demonstration twice and told me about it many times. My middle name, Augusto, is after Augusto Righi."

"The machine made lightning bolts?" Lydia asked, beginning to smile.

"Little lightning bolts, yes. Or, as you might say, very large sparks." Enzo, too, began to smile.

"How would one make a time machine?"

"It's the same as with making a suit. First I make the pattern, then I make the finished suit — or in this case, the machine."

"But how does it work? I mean, how does lightning make the time machine possible?"

"The lightning bolt makes a tiny rip in the fabric of space-time, in the precise present, in the *now*. And if you are right there when it happens, as close as you can get, you will suddenly find yourself on the frayed edge of the fabric of space-time. It stands to reason."

Lydia felt unreasonably happy. "When the time is right, I would like very much to see your machine."

"I'll invite you."

Lydia stayed and talked with Enzo until he closed the shop, and then she walked home, reflecting on all the turns their conversation had taken.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

9

Augusto Righi (1850-1921) is probably best known for his study of electromagnetic oscillations. His principal teaching post was at the University of Bologna, but he also taught at the University of Palermo in the years 1880-1885. The machine which Enzo Capellino's father saw Righi demonstrate was most likely the one designed by Righi to accumulate weak electric charges. Essentially, the apparatus consisted of a rubber belt looped between two metal pulleys set one above the other, and at the upper end of the loop the belt traveled through a small opening into a hollow copper sphere, leaving its electric charge there. In theory, there is no limit to the voltage which can be accumulated on the sphere. Probably the earliest precursor of Righi's apparatus was a device built by Walckiers de St. Amand in France in 1784. His machine was simply a silken belt stretched between two rollers, so that when you turned the rollers the silk moved, rubbing against small cushions positioned at the rollers, thereby accumulating an electric charge.

Enzo had long known that if he brushed his hand across certain materials, such as fur or wool or silk, an electric charge accumulated, so that if he then reached for a piece of metal a spark would jump from his finger to the metal, giving him a tiny shock. In his tailor shop he had noticed that he was able to get a particularly large spark by drawing wool cloth across the brass yardstick which formed the end of his cutting table, so he planned a machine with a broad continuous belt of thick wool looped tightly between two brass rollers and, of course, at one end there would be a large hollow copper sphere, pierced with a hole so that one of the rollers could be fixed inside.

10

The sky was blue and the air warm when Lydia next visited the tailor's shop. The clothing dummy in the window — the top half of a cheerful man who had worn a Harris tweed jacket all winter — now wore a white jacket with bright azure stripes; furthermore, he had a straw boater on his head and his stiff hands were holding a cardboard sign (ON VACATION! WILL RETURN IN FUTURE.) The door was unlocked, so Lydia walked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through the shop and out to the garden where Enzo, in his shirt sleeves, was bent over a gleaming brass roller at least a yard long. His back was toward her, so she called out, "Mr. Capellino, hello."

He straightened up and turned around, smiling. "You make my name sound so beautiful," he said. "Please call me Enzo."

"And you may call me Lydia, if you wish," she replied.

"Lydia, I'll get us something cool to drink." He dashed up a rickety flight of outdoor stairs and entered the floor above the shop. Lydia looked around at the curved sheets of metal which lay here and there, and at the tangled garden which was just beginning to come into blossom. Enzo returned with a painted tray bearing a bottle and two glasses half-filled with ice.

"You are actually building an actual time machine," Lydia said, clearly surprised.

"Actually, yes." He poured something as dark as coffee from the bottle into one of the glasses and handed it to her.

"Now, I hope you will accept this," Lydia said, handing him a large flat parcel. While Enzo unfolded the wrapping paper, she told him, "The librarian from Harvard says that the bookcase behind my father's desk has a number of valuable books about botany and horticulture. Dwight — he's the librarian — knows about these things, about how valuable the books are. Right down to the penny. He's afraid somebody might steal one of the volumes, so we should give them to Harvard for permanent safekeeping. He's not concerned about this one and he let me take it from the house. It's my father's garden diary, all about the flowers in back of our house. Twenty years of notes and drawings."

Enzo gently opened the worn volume. "This is wonderful, truly wonderful," he murmured. "It's a treasure and it should remain in your family. I appreciate your thinking of me," — he was pressing the notebook to his chest as he said this — "but this journal should remain in your family, in your hands," he said, giving it back to her. "Your father was a great botanist. He loved his plants almost as much as he loved you."

Lydia's eyes glistened and there was an awkward silence. Enzo raised his glass. "To you," he said cheerfully and he drank.

Lydia raised her glass. "To you," she echoed. The beverage was like liquid fire and not sweet. "Well!" she said, gasping from the drink. "Well, well, well. Please tell me about your machine."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Enzo described how he was building a hollow metal tube which would be about four feet in diameter and stand about twenty feet tall. Inside, at the bottom of the tube, was a brass roller driven by an electric motor. A broad belt of wool ran from the bottom roller, up the tube and over another brass roller, then down the tube to the bottom roller again. And at the top of the tube there would be a great hollow metal sphere to gather the electric charges which would fly from the cloth, he explained. "That's the hard part," he added.

"The electric charges?"

"No. The hard part is getting the sphere to rest just right at the top of the tube. It's already fallen down twice. I think I've misplaced some pieces."

"It's best to keep everything in its place, because then there's a place for everything. That's what Dwight says."

"Oh, yes. Dwight," murmured Enzo. "Would you like a little more wine?"

"Is it legal to drink this?"

"Oh, yes. My father made this many, many years ago. Before Prohibition. He loved to make wine. Shall I refill your glass?"

Lydia began to laugh — a remarkably rich musical laugh. "Ah, Enzo, please, do," she said, holding out her glass. She was, Enzo realized, just the slightest bit drunk. The days were getting longer and they enjoyed each other's company until twilight, when Lydia said good-bye.

11

Under the hot Sun Enzo had stripped to the waist and was working on the starter switch of the time machine when Lydia walked into the garden. "Hello, Enzo," she said. "I received your invitation and here I am." The 1920s fashion for women was all flatness and no curves, which struck Enzo as comically wrong, yet as she came walking in her sleeveless dress, one hand swinging the long strand of large green beads she wore around her neck, she was the most desirable woman in the world. As for Lydia, she wondered why she was there, saying hello to this short bronze man whose shoulders glistened with sweat and whose thick chest hair — well, Enzo had already snatched up his shirt and was buttoning it while she took in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the great time machine. It stood erect in the center of the small garden, a thick twenty-foot column topped by a sphere which had been beautifully proportioned to the shaft but, as Enzo explained to Lydia, it had fallen a few times and was now somewhat reshaped. Indeed, it resembled a blunt arrowhead pointing skyward. "What do you think?" Enzo asked her.

Lydia shaded her eyes with her hand and gazed up at his apparatus. "It reminds me of something. I can't think what. It's rather like — Oh! — It does look rather like a, or like the — " Lydia hesitated, searching for the proper term. "Yes, like a stamen, the stamen of a great flower."

Enzo stood beside her, also looking up at it. "Ah, I had not thought of that," Enzo said slowly. "But, yes, I suppose it does."

"And it will make lightning?" she asked him.

"Yes, at the top. I'm sure of that."

"And the lightning will tear the fabric of space-time, make a little rip in it?"

"Yes, I'm sure of that, too."

"And you'll be able to leap forward into next year or the year after that?"

"Ah," Enzo sat down on a small garden bench. "I'm not so sure of that. I've been working without sleep for the past five days. But I hope so." Indeed, he did look tired.

"I hope so, too," Lydia said.

"I'll get us a cool drink," Enzo said. He went up the wobbly flight of outdoor stairs and into his rooms above the shop and came back down with a basket of ice which cradled two large bottles of wine and two glasses. The day was warm and there was an uncertain breeze that blew strongly one moment and vanished the next, leaving only a dry stillness. Lydia sat on a cast-iron garden chair and Enzo sat on the small wood bench and they drifted in a long winding conversation as they drank the cool wine.

Lydia asked him about the metalwork at the top of the outdoor stairway. "It looks like a big bird cage," she said.

"Ah, that's a protective cage," Enzo said. "After starting the machine, I'll go up those stairs and get inside it. At that height I'll be level with the top of the lightning machine and close to it, but the lattice of metal will protect me from being hit."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lydia looked worried. "Are you sure you'll be safe? Won't you be electrocuted?"

Enzo smiled. "I'll be safe. My only worry is that the rip in the fabric of space-time won't be big enough for me to slip through."

Lydia looked at the metal column with its banged up arrow-head crown. "How strange," she said reflectively. "Here you are on an ordinary Monday afternoon. You're about to leap forward in time, and no one knows."

"You're here, and that's the world to me. Now it's time I tested it." Enzo strode to the machine and pressed the starter button. The motor began turning the brass roller so the great wool belt began to move, rising up inside the tall metal cylinder, passing over the roller inside the metal sphere and down again. Little by little the speed of the rollers increased, the belt blurred, and the air was filled with a humming rattle. Enzo drank off the last of his wine, tossed the glass over his shoulder — he discovered that he could make these gestures with complete confidence so long as Lydia was nearby — and mounted the trembling stairway to the lattice cage. He stepped into the cage and looked down to the garden to discover that Lydia's chair was empty. She was running up the stairs. She called to him, but the humming of the machine had grown louder.

"The librarian is going to ask me to marry him," she said. "I don't know what to do. I haven't been able to sleep for days."

"I can't hear you," cried Enzo from inside the cage, plainly shocked at what he had heard.

"He wrote me a letter last week, saying he was going to ask me this evening."

"The librarian!"

"Yes, Dwight has a schedule, and this evening he's going to ask me to marry him. What do you think —"

"I think he's an unpronounceable clump of consonants," Enzo shouted over the growing thunder of the machine.

"Dwight says the future is known to people who make schedules."

"Will you marry a man who has a place for everything and everything in its place? A time for everything and everything in its time?"

"I'm forty-one years old and no one has ever proposed marriage to me," she said, lifting her voice against the crackle of sparks.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm forty-three and have never dared propose marriage to anyone. I've achieved nothing!"

A bluish glow hovered over the row of phonograph needles which were fixed a hairsbreadth from the flying surface of the belt, and long thread-like sparks began to flare from the bent edges of the sphere atop the machine.

"*You have made this wonderful machine,*" she cried.

"*But it may work no better than I have!*"

Enzo threw open the lattice door and started out to meet her just as Lydia started in, the two clutching each other as the first lightning bolt unfurled and snapped overhead like a colossal whip. The hair on Enzo's chest burst into flame, scorching Lydia's breasts. The world overflowed with light as every nail and rivet, every garden tool, the cast iron garden chair and even the garden itself surged toward them, all the while flaring apart, coming undone. "Yes!" Lydia thought — or maybe she actually cried aloud — "Yes! We're at the front edge of *now* and these are the raveled threads of space-time." And everything melted like a meteor into the rising dark.

12

When Enzo opened his eyes he was flat on his back in the garden. He realized that his arms were around Lydia, her arms over his shoulders and her eyes closed in sleep. The collapsed remnants of the lattice cage lay upon them like a shredded blanket. Lydia opened her eyes and sat up. She looked at the blue sky, glanced down at her singed dress and the string of melted beads, then looked at Enzo. "We're alive and it's a beautiful day," she said.

"Yes," said Enzo, looking at his pocket watch whose fused hands said three o'clock. "And I wonder *which* day it is."

They went through the shop and out the front door to the street to ask the first passerby what day it was and what time of day. It was three in the afternoon on Tuesday, May 22, 1928, precisely twenty-four hours ahead of where they had been.

"You've worked wonders, Enzo. We've jumped a day ahead and we're free to make whatever we want of our time."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I propose marriage," he said, smiling up at her.

"I accept," she said, returning his smile.

Then they set off to get dinner, because they both felt wonderfully hungry, quite famished in fact, as if they had been asleep and had not eaten for a whole day.

13

In June of 1928 a man buying a seersucker jacket asked Enzo what the equipment in the back yard was for. When Enzo told him that it was a machine for generating lightning bolts, the man became extraordinarily interested and asked so many questions that Enzo, in a burst of confidence, began to tell him about the fabric of space-time, upon which the man gave a short laugh and said the tailor didn't know what he was talking about.

In 1929, a year after Enzo and Lydia had made their jump forward in time, Robert Van de Graaff built a small electrostatic generator at Princeton University, capable of producing around eighty thousand volts. Later, at the inaugural dinner of the American Institute of Physics, he demonstrated an improved version of the same apparatus. It resembled in all essentials the very much larger and more powerful machine which had stood behind Capellino's shop. In 1931 Van de Graaff joined the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and began assembling a double generator composed of two twenty-three-foot-high columns, each containing two belts and supporting an aluminum sphere six feet in diameter. This machine, capable of generating fifty million electron volts, was housed in its own building at MIT and, after some changes, was used as an atom smasher. In the 1950s MIT donated it to the Boston Museum of Science and in 1980 the Museum installed it in the Thomson Theatre of Electricity, where it currently produces spectacular demonstrations of man-made lightning.

14

Enzo and Lydia were married on Saturday, June 23, 1928, and their daughter, Abigail Santuzza Capellino, was born in autumn of the following

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

year. They lived in the large square house on Kirkland Street, and Enzo continued to work as a tailor for some months, then sold his shop in order to devote himself to the extensive Chase gardens, which were succumbing to overgrowth and weeds. Old Professor Chase's collection of works by Charles Downing led Enzo and Lydia to an interest in pomology, and they became quite expert in that field, publishing a number of papers on apple species of New England and New York.

Although they wrote for scholarly horticultural journals and for garden club magazines, neither Enzo nor Lydia ever published anything about their time transit. They remained silent about the event partly because they enjoyed their privacy, and partly because they came to know how dangerous the experiment had been. They were lucky to have awakened with nothing worse than hunger pangs, as if they had merely been asleep for a day, but they feared some other experimenter might not survive. Despite the protective metal latticework, technically known as a Faraday cage, the couple were fortunate not to have been electrocuted—much as Ben Franklin, flying his kite into an electrical storm, had been fortunate. Still, a lightning flash during a summer storm always remained a happy sight for the couple. It was a great pleasure for Lydia and Enzo to take their grandchildren to the Museum of Science in Boston to witness the lightning bolts thrown off by that machine which is called a Van de Graaff generator.

Most encyclopedias have an entry for Robert Jamison Van de Graaff (1901-1967) and, if the encyclopedia is large enough, there may be one for Augusto Righi (1850-1920), a figure better known in Italy where there is, indeed, a school named for him. But virtually no one has heard of Enzo Augusto Capellino (1885-1970) or Lydia Prescott Capellino (1887-1971). I wish to thank Abigail Capellino Beauchemin, the daughter of Enzo and Lydia, who has generously made available to me her father's notes and diagrams, and her mother's diary for the years 1927 and 1928.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Elaine Stirling has published ten suspense and romance novels over the last two decades, along with the occasional short story in venues like Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine. *She lives in Ontario but her first story for us heads down to the American Southwest where we'll meet the proprietor of a New Age store and a few of his clients.*

White Cloud

By Elaine Stirling

"HAS ANYONE HERE SEEN my mom?"

The boy holding the photograph couldn't have been more than sixteen, seventeen, although the rows of silver hoops along his eyebrows and the Frankenstein studs on his cheeks and lower lip were clearly meant to deter you from looking too close. Skinny and pale as a fish belly, he wore a black leather jacket with the sleeves ripped off, frayed cutoff jeans and knee-high combat boots. His various tattoos included notched swords, double-headed axes, your usual cartoon superhero stuff.

There were about half a dozen customers in the Silver Oracle at the time and they all looked up, some of them in horror. It's a funny thing about people working on their karma. They'll spend a fortune on books written by weirdos with goofy names and scary hairdos. They'll spend thousands on package tours to drink spit-beer with naked shamans in malaria-infested jungles, but drop someone slightly counterculture into their midst and they scatter like old maids in a drizzle. The wood chimes at the door announced the hasty departures of at least three of them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I came out from around the counter where I'd rung through yet another copy of *Breathing Techniques to Make You a Billionaire*. "Hello, son. May I take a look?"

First he backed off. I can have that effect on people. But once he realized I wasn't going to toss him out, he handed me the picture.

It was a basic four-by-six-inch Kodak of a forty-something woman sitting on a sofa with a young teenaged boy — my newest acquaintance minus a few years and the metal. She had chin-length blond hair from a bottle, wide-set brown eyes just like her son, and a nice smile. "Fine looking woman," I said.

"Have you seen her?"

"Not that I recall. When was she here last?"

"About three years ago."

"Hell," I said, handing the photo back. "I have trouble remembering three weeks ago."

I could see right away that I shouldn't have joked. The kid's shoulders slumped, the light left his eyes. What skin and bone there was of him seemed to shrink even smaller.

"Thanks anyway," he said, turning.

"Hold on a minute."

He stopped, not bothering to raise his head.

"Would you mind showing me her picture again?"

"What for?" he said. I didn't blame him. He was protecting his mom, or what remained of her for him, from the gorilla with the smart-ass tongue.

"We have a few regulars in here. Thought I'd ask around."

"Can't let you have it," he said.

"I just meant right now, with the folks who are in the store." I was humoring him, we both knew it. But my guess was, this kid was reaching the end of his trail, and there's a certain luxury comes when you got nowhere else to go.

He handed me the photo.

I looked around at my three remaining customers and knew once again that I'd blown it. Ernestine Satchell was president of the local Spiritual Snobs Association. That wasn't the group's real name, of course, but it gives you an idea. She and her wealthy cronies met every week to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

do past life regressions, channel ETs, and gossip about other people's auras.

"Ernestine, can you help us out here?"

She had been rummaging through the healing stones, cursing herself, I knew, for not ducking out when she had the chance. Her sterling silver dreamcatcher earrings tinkled when she looked up. "Why, certainly, White Cloud."

Ernestine came over and looked at the photo without actually touching it. I counted off the seconds. One, two....

When enough time had passed, she said to me, not the boy, "I'm sorry, I've never seen her before."

I gave a curt nod.

"Well, White Cloud, I really must be going."

I turned away, gave her my frostiest shoulder. Ernestine, I knew, would write off my behavior as a cultural thing. Native Americans, especially the men, don't waste words, she would say at her next group meeting, and they don't like eye contact.

"What about that guy?" the boy asked, pointing to an empty spot where Sam had once stood.

"I don't think...."

"Is he a regular?"

"Oh, yeah."

"You said you'd ask around."

"That is what I said." I peered around the shelves. "Sam...you there?"

He didn't answer, didn't expect he would. Sam, whose last name I'd never learned, had a full-blown terror of psychic attack. Over the years, he'd probably emptied my store two times over buying crystals, rattles, meditation CDs, and icons of every deity known to man. Sometimes when I was doing ceremony, I would envision Sam and blow sacred smoke through his aura. (It looked like gray Swiss cheese.) Then I wouldn't see him for three, four days. So I quit doing that. Call me a greedy bugger, but you can't pay the rent if you heal your best customers.

"Why is he hiding?" the boy whispered.

"He wants you to think he's not here," I whispered back.

"Yeah, but why?"

"He thinks you're a government agent."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The boy's hardy laugh scared even me. I glared at him, put a finger to my mouth. But I couldn't contain his glee and didn't really want to.

"May I see the picture?"

We turned at the same time to find a pretty young woman looking at us. I'd noticed her earlier, of course. It's a proprietor's job to notice everyone who comes in, but I'd never seen her before today. She was slender and blonde (not from a bottle) and wore a floor-length black sun dress with a fiery gold Oriental dragon snaking up the front. She was holding a book on White Magic.

I turned to the boy. It was his call. I thought he looked a bit stunned, the way you look when a Frisbee has just hit you on the forehead. His hand moved slowly across the space between them.

The girl studied the photo with great care. She turned it around, as if maybe there was some kind of clue written there, only no one had thought of looking. Then she examined the picture again. Finally she smiled and handed it back to him. "Thank you," she said.

"No problem," he replied.

I didn't know quite what to do next. The boy and I had exhausted our possibilities, but it didn't seem right just to send him away. Sam, I heard from the chimes, had already effected his escape, and a glance at the clock told me it was twenty minutes to closing. Twenty very long minutes if the three of us were just going to keep gawking at each other. "How about some tea?" I suggested.

"Umm...no, thanks," the boy said.

"It's on the house."

"I'd love some tea," the girl said.

"Me too," he piped.

Great, I thought, the kid's not here five minutes, and Cupid has already shot his arrow.

The small L-shaped alcove at the back of the store was a nice private spot for spiritual seekers and a place for me to snooze when my upstairs apartment got too hot. There were two wicker chairs, a coffee table and an overstuffed sofa with a handmade Navajo blanket. In the corner was a card table with a stainless steel urn. A wooden sign hanging from the urn read, HELP YOURSELF, TODAY'S FEATURE FLAVOR, SAGE. Regulars at the Silver Oracle knew that Today's Feature Flavor was always Sage.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Newcomers thought, isn't that sweet, free tea, and a new kind every day.

I'd been drinking sage tea ever since I quit the hard stuff, two years, four months and thirteen days ago. Health books will tell you that sage is good for the heart, the circulation, damned near everything, but I drink it because the smell brings me back to my days on the rez. Riding Old Paint at a full gallop, my hair blowing, the tingle of wild sage and piñon against a brisk west wind. Life just doesn't get better than that, but at ten, I was too young to know it.

I found three mugs with no cracks and hardly any chips and filled them with hot green brew. I handed the angel mug to the girl who was sitting at one end of the sofa. I gave the plain black one to the boy who sat at the opposite end. I kept Bob's Full-Serve Esso for myself and took the wicker chair. "By the way," I said, "my name's White Cloud."

"I'm Brian," the boy said, reaching over to shake my hand.

"Pleasure to meet you."

We both turned to the young woman. "My name," she said, with a toss of her straight blonde locks, "is Antigone."

Brian snorted. "What kind of name is that? Did you just make it up?"

Incredible, I thought, the kid's got the same way with women as me.

"I'll have you know," she said, "Antigone was the heroine of a famous Greek tragedy."

"Yeah, but that doesn't make you her."

She glared at him in a very pretty, pouty way, and then, to my surprise, she caved. "My real name is Jane, okay? But I hate it. I'd be really grateful if you called me by my new name."

"Sure," he said, as if he'd only been looking for honesty all along.

"How old are you?" Antigone asked Brian.

"Seventeen, nearly. How old are you?"

"I'll be twenty next month." They both slurped their tea in unison.

Well, now that we got that straightened out. "Do you live around here?" I asked him.

"I'm from Detroit."

"You've come a long ways."

"Been to six states, so far."

"How long you been looking?"

"I've been on the road a year and a half. Mom's been missing for three."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Three years ago, that's when she was here," Antigone said, clearing up any doubts as to whether she'd been eavesdropping earlier.

"Yeah, we came down here on vacation, just her and me. Two weeks later, we drove back home. I woke up the next morning, she was gone."

"Didn't the police look for her?"

"Sure, at first, but then they figured she ran off with her boyfriend. She would never do that. Mom would never leave without telling me." Brian was staring into his tea, clutching the mug so tight his fingernails were blue. "Anyway, her boyfriend was a bastard. He's the reason we came down here, to get away from him."

Antigone and I both stopped asking questions. A person's walking through his pain, best thing to do is wait off to the side. I got up, rummaged in the milk crate underneath the card table and found a box of ancient grain crackers that some health food salesman had given me as samples. I poured some onto a plate (they landed like flagstones) and brought them to my guests. The air seemed to have cleared a little. "It's a good thing," I said, offering the crackers, "not to give up on someone, but what made you decide to come here, to the Oracle?"

Brian took a handful. "Mom loved this place. We were staying at the campground down the road, and we used to come here almost every day. That's why I thought you'd remember."

"Hmm." I nodded, dropped my gaze.

"We hiked all the trails together. She used to talk to the trees, pick up stones and shit for her medicine bag — oh, sorry, I didn't mean no disrespect."

"Don't worry about it." I was racking my brain, trying to remember a blonde woman with a thirteen-year-old boy, and coming up empty. The canyons of my brain ran deep where the Five Star brandy used to flow, and I knew there was lots I would never get back. "Was I working then?" I asked, hoping that maybe I'd been somewhere else fishing.

"Yeah, you were here, but you were different."

"Different how?"

"I dunno."

But Brian did know, he was just being kind. I was louder then and happier, in that sad, drunk kind of way. I could talk New Age bullshit till your ears fell off. I could tell you who you were in another life, I could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

channel your guides and jumpstart your chakras, snockered to the eyeballs the whole time. And in case you're wondering about the smell, Altoids and incense can go a long way.

I looked at my watch. "Time to close the store."

"Wait." Antigone leaped from the sofa. "There's some stuff I want to buy."

"Sure." I got up and went to the cash register, suddenly all business. I didn't want to deal with Brian and his missing mother, and I especially didn't want to remember the man I used to be — hell, the man I still was. I was a twenty-first-century snake oil salesman, and if I planned to stay sober between now and bedtime, it would be good for me to remember that.

Antigone took almost no time gathering what she wanted. She got the book on white magic, a copy of *Wicca for Beginners*, and a pile of tools for grounding and spell casting. Normally, I would have "confirmed her purchases" as the retail gurus like to put it, maybe worked in an upsell or two, but this time, I rang them through without comment.

I was swiping Antigone's bank card when she leaned across the counter and whispered, "You have to help him, you know."

I punched a couple of buttons, handed her the pinpad. "No, I don't."

"But he's come all this way."

"Yeah?" I growled, hoping she'd catch the unspoken, "So?"

"How can you even...and you call yourself a — oh, never mind!"

"I don't call myself anything." That much at least was true. I couldn't help what my customers said.

Antigone had perfect pink lips to go with everything else that was perfect about her, and they were pursed now in disgust while she punched in her numbers. I had a fleeting glimpse of what a formidable witch she would turn out to be, but for the time being at least, she was harmless.

Purchase approved. Tear off transaction receipt, staple to sales bill, insert with purchases into appropriate-sized bag. "Thank you for shopping at the Silver Oracle." I offered my finest customer service smile. "Hope to see you again soon."

As soon as the door slammed, in the very instant that the first two bamboo stalks collided in chime, I returned to normal. Normal, for me, that is.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I thanked whatever gods might be hovering that Brian hadn't gotten up from the sofa, that he hadn't wandered over and heard what an unutterable asshole I can be when I'm reminded of the fact that I can't have a drink. Ever.

"Look," I said, sinking into the chair beside him. "I don't know if I can be of any help. But I got a couple of venison steaks in the freezer and a sofa bed upstairs that's halfways comfortable. If you need a place to bunk down while you're looking for your mom, you got one."

If I'd a been his age, going through what he must have gone through, I'd have probably bawled like a baby. His eyes filled up and his facial muscles went through a few contortions, but other than that, he held it all together. "Thanks," he said, "I appreciate it."

THE NEXT DAY was my day off, and it dawned a fine one, sunny and cool. October, this part of the state, was as close to perfection as weather could get. There were no bugs, no tourists, just the clean scent of pine and an endless blue sky.

I brewed a fresh pot of Ethiopian Gold, poured myself a cup. Then I tiptoed past the sleeping bulge on the sofa bed to the back door. My luxury view from the top of the fire escape included a small gravel parking lot and the neighbor's back yard, bordered with weeds and derelict chicken wire.

Today was laundry day, or to be more precise, it was the day that I argued with myself against doing laundry. There were few things I hated more than hauling my lazy butt down Main Street to the local Wash 'n' Dry. I always ran into people who recognized me, and they always had things they wanted to say. "Hey, White Cloud, I had this dream last night," or, "Remember when you told me I'd be meeting someone?" It didn't matter if I was carrying eight bags of groceries or folding boxers with a Walkman in my ear. Time was getting close, maybe, to move to some old mountaintop.

"Hi."

I looked up, saw a face I hardly recognized. It was Brian with sticky up morning hair and no Frankenstein studs. I understood now why he wore them. In his natural state, he looked all of twelve. "Hi," I said. "Hungry?"

He shrugged. He was famished, was what he was saying.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I told him to help himself to the shower while I cooked us some breakfast.

Somewhere between flipping eggs and buttering toast, I got the notion of checking out the woods. Brian had said that he and his mom hiked all the trails when they were here, and I thought maybe, if we retraced them together....

That was as far as my thought went, but it was enough. At least I'd be spared the ignominy of Main Street and whatever voodoo curse Antigone might have put on me last night. I put the proposition to Brian while we ate.

"I was thinking the woods was where I'd begin," he said.

"I don't want you getting your hopes up," I warned him, like an idiot.

"That's my business," he growled.

Brian insisted on doing the dishes, which impressed the hell out of me, after which we locked up and descended the fire escape stairs. Coming around the front of the store, we nearly crashed into Antigone whose nose was pressed up against the display window.

"We're closed Mondays," I said.

She let out a shriek, slapped a hand to her chest. "My God, you scared me half to death!"

"Sorry, didn't mean to."

I might have been treated to a further tongue lashing, but then she noticed I wasn't alone and her features softened. "Good morning, Brian."

"Morning."

She looked from him to me and back again. In that brief instant, I knew I'd been redeemed. "What are you guys up to?"

"Nothing much," I said.

"Hiking," Brian said. "Wanna join us?"

"I can't. I've got classes." Hearing the crash of his poor young heart, she added, "But I'm free later, for coffee, or whatever."

"That's cool," he said.

They were exchanging twinkly smiles when I noticed something brush past Antigone. A shadow, a movement, I couldn't be sure. Whatever it was, I didn't like the look of it.

"Was there something you wanted this morning?" I asked her, careful to give nothing away in my voice.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What? Oh, yeah, I almost forgot." She fumbled through a crammed purse, whipped out a leather sheath and from that, a double-edged knife. I ducked as a flash of sunlight glanced off the whizzing blade. "My athame doesn't work," she said.

I noticed after I got my breath back that she had pronounced it "athayme," to rhyme with Auntie Mame. "Ah-*thah*-meh," I corrected. "How do you know it doesn't work?"

She was wearing a dragon again today, this time on a black wrap skirt. Its scales were varying shades of teal green, its outstretched claws ferocious. Everything else about Antigone, her pastel tank top, soft golden tan, exuded gentle femininity.

"I was using it last night," she said, slicing back and forth through the air like a maniac, "to disconnect from my boyfriend. He phoned me this morning, and we had a horrible fight."

"How long you had the athame?" Brian asked.

"I just bought it yesterday."

"Did you bless it?"

"No. Was I supposed to?"

He gave her one of those are-you-ever-a-loser looks that you can only give when you're under eighteen.

"Oh," she said, examining the tool with renewed interest. "Will you show me how?"

"Sure."

"I thought you weren't into that stuff," I said to Brian.

"Doesn't mean I wasn't paying attention."

"So I'll see you later then," Antigone said.

"Yeah," Brian said.

She scribbled something on a scrap of paper. "Here's my cell number. Give me a call when you want to get together."

"Thanks."

There it was again, that darting movement around Antigone. If it were visible, it would look like a curtain snapping in the wind or a dark, mottled linen being yanked off a table. It had a taunting now-you-see-me, now-you-don't quality. And I'd seen the bugger twice.

"Let's go," I said to Brian, giving him a nudge. "We've got lots of ground to cover."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

I was a kid the first time I noticed things that couldn't be seen, and I might not have noticed them if they hadn't gotten in the way of serious playtime. Most of them were harmless, annoying, really—initiated by my parents, endured by me. I remember trying to explain them to my friends, and getting laughed at. For one thing, I couldn't find the right words, which made my tongue knot up and my chest tighten. I would gasp and stutter, turn red in the face. My childhood asthma probably started around then. For another thing, my buddies didn't care about what they called pissy-sissy stuff. Our heroes in those days were John Wayne and John Glenn, larger-than-life white guys. Sure, we pretended sometimes to be Crazy Horse or Geronimo, but we knew only of their warrior exploits. No one ever told us of their wise and impenetrable quiet sides.

Now, nearly fifty years later, I was learning to walk with that mixed-up kid I used to be. It wasn't walking side by side like Brian and I were doing when we entered the North Trail. It was more like being one inside the other, the young White Cloud within the elder, moving in synchrony, a drumbeat.

I had instructed Brian at the edge of the woods to remember his mother as she was when they were hiking. "Be who you were then," I said. "If you were annoyed with her, feel it. If you were having fun, feel that too. Be a thirteen-year-old kid on vacation with his mom. I'm just going to walk alongside. Where the trail narrows, I'll follow you."

He seemed to have no trouble understanding my instructions, but acting on them was something else. For the first quarter mile, he battled with fear, scattering and shattering everything around him. Gradually, his emotions calmed, and then he sank into sadness.

"Don't *miss* your mom," I grumbled, "*gather* her. Bring her here with you now."

With sputtering uncertainty, he started to bring his mother into focus. Bound by the trail and rhythm of the walk, I could feel his mind quieting. I urged Brian to quicken his pace. If I could keep us both on the edge of windedness, where thoughts can't so easily intrude, we'd have a better chance of succeeding.

The trails were circular, great looping things that wound and climbed through the foothills of the northwestern mountains. The forests were old

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

growth with some birch and maple, but mostly they were jack pine, juniper, and spruce. There was something primeval about an evergreen forest, the way it held you in, cushioning the ground and screening out the sunlight. Senses were awakened and reconfigured. You could feel the towering pride of an old spruce on your skin, taste electric silver-blue around a juniper. And as my people have known for millennia, an evergreen forest can smoke you. You can walk for hours and hours through a pine woods, never feel tired, not realize that you're lost and swear as you're drawing your last breath that you've covered no distance at all.

I saw the outline of her first. A tall woman, long-limbed, loose in the shoulders, arms swinging freely as she walked. There was no tension in her, not here, in this current memory. The echoes of her laughter spiraled upward through the treetops, wove happily through birds' nests and burst through the berries of creeping vines. As the trail rose, I could feel the surge of her powerful heartbeat. She was in good shape when she passed through these woods, no clogged arteries, no tar or nicotine gumming up her lungs. I wondered for a brief, pointless moment if people would change once science could prove that every footfall, every breath we take on Mother Earth is recorded. Probably not, we're such idiots. But the fact remained, the woman who'd gone missing in the visible world had left her full story in the rocks and trees, and in the unconscious mind of the boy who walked before me.

It took me seven or eight miles of hard hiking before I felt confident of keeping her trail. A good bloodhound can sniff a piece of clothing once and remember the scent for days. Sure, it's a different kind of scent — or maybe it's not, what do I know? Anyways, what I'm saying is, I'd make a lousy bloodhound.

Brian was exhausted, and so was I. We never let up our pace, not once, and when I finally told him he could take it easy, we both realized we were flat-out whacked. We collapsed at the edge of a rocky mountain stream. The water was cold, clean, tasted like heaven. We took off our shoes and soaked our blistered feet, then fell onto our backs in silence and gratitude.

I wasn't going to ask anything more of Brian that day. He'd accomplished wonders, though he probably didn't know it, and what lay ahead would demand far greater reserves of energy and trust than he'd used up

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

today. "You know something, don't you?" was the only thing he said on our slow plod homeward.

I gave a nondistinctive twitch of the shoulders. Maybe.

"There were two places in the world where my mom was happiest — in her studio and outside with nature," Brian said that night to Antigone, who had joined us for pizza and root beer.

"Wasn't she happy when she was with you?"

Brian gave a lopsided grin. "Well, yeah, but who wouldn't be?"

The two of them had spent the twilight hour on the fire escape with a bowl of water and sea salt to cleanse Antigone's athame. This was no somber affair of witchery. I could hear them laughing, flicking water at each other through the open window. When they came inside, I noticed a thin layer of protection around Antigone. The equivalent of mosquito net; it wouldn't stop whatever was trying to harm her for long, but it was a start.

"What kind of studio did your mom have?" I asked, my throbbing feet in clean socks propped on the coffee table.

"She was a glass maker. Not just flasks and vases, she could make anything — sculptures, landscapes. Once, she made a whole ceiling for some European gazillionaire that looked like an ocean floor. There were corals, fish, sea anemones that looked like they were actually in water — it was amazing."

A loud shattering noise made me sit up, slam both feet on the floor.

"What's the matter?" Brian asked.

I looked around, saw that all my priceless clutter was still in place. I noticed too that Antigone had startled at the same instant, though not as intensely. She probably would have passed it off as a nervous shudder if Brian hadn't spoken.

"What was that?" she asked. "Did something break downstairs?"

"Don't think so," I said.

"I didn't hear anything." Brian helped himself to another piece of pizza.

"Shh," I said, closing my eyes for a better look. It took me a while to get past the two young people staring at me, and the digestive burbles of my stomach. I had a brief, inappropriate longing for something alcoholic,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and then my thoughts settled. Deeper and deeper, I could feel myself sinking, the way you do when you're falling asleep. I might even have dozed off and snored for a few minutes, which would account for Brian and Antigone's expressions when I sat bolt upright, wide-eyed. "Do you remember," I said, "when you got home from vacation, three years ago?"

"Uh...yeah."

Brian was looking freaked, and I realized that I was staring at him like some kind of bogey man. I rubbed my eyes, tried to bring back my usual charming expression. "Was your mom working on something at the time?"

"She was always working on something."

"The day she went missing, you said you woke up and she was gone. What time was that?"

"I don't know, probably around noon. It was summer vaca — " He stopped suddenly. "Something was broken in the studio when I got up. I remember seeing glass everywhere. The police even asked me about it later."

"What was the piece, do you know?"

"I can't remember, it was part of something huge...for a hotel lobby, I think."

"A natural scene?"

"Uh-huh." Brian set down the pizza and covered his eyes with both hands. "Lemme think now, there was lots of glass. It was white...pale blue...some of it was clear."

"Water," Antigone suggested.

"Yeah." He sat up. "A waterfall...that's what it was. Something must have gone wrong in the kiln, and the glass didn't set properly."

"Where was the waterfall in real life?" I asked.

"Shit, I don't know. No, wait...there was this nature center, not far from Detroit. We used to go there a lot. It has this humongous gorge with rapids, and at the end of the rapids, you come to a...." His face, normally pale, drained to a translucent gray. "That's where she is, isn't she?"

I nodded. "I'm pretty sure."

"Did someone...?"

"No, it was her heart. An infarction, I think they call it. People who seem perfectly healthy can — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Wait a minute, White Cloud," Antigone protested. "You can't just make something up off the top of your head, and then tell a person who's been searching for years — "

"It's okay," Brian said. "He's right."

"But you can't know. You're a thousand miles away, for Pete's sake, and it's been three years."

"Doesn't matter."

"So what are you going to tell the police, that you talked with a couple of nuts at a New Age store and you suddenly know where your mother is?"

Brian picked up Antigone's athame with the mother-of-pearl handle and the double-edged blade. Normally, I tell new witches they shouldn't let other people touch their tools, but in this case, I had no problem. He turned the blade slowly, staring into the mirrored surfaces. With his fingertip, he touched the point gently and laid the tool down. "I'm gonna tell them," he said, "to look at Mom's sketches, and then bring them to the waterfalls."

"And if they don't find her?"

Looking up at Antigone, he offered no reply. After a minute or two, her eyes widened. "Oh," she said, and her tears, like a waterfall, flowed.

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

PLEASE DO NOT COUNT ON THE POST OFFICE TO FORWARD YOUR ISSUES AFTER YOU MOVE. IF YOU ARE PLANNING A CHANGE OF ADDRESS, PLEASE NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE, AND ALLOW SIX WEEKS FOR THE CHANGE TO BECOME EFFECTIVE. BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD AND NEW ADDRESS, INCLUDING THE ZIP CODES. PRINT CLEARLY AND, IF POSSIBLE, ATTACH AN OLD MAILING LABEL.

OR USE OUR HANDY CHANGE OF ADDRESS FORM ONLINE AT www.fsfmag.com

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE

Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FILMS

KATHI MAIO

CULT STATUS ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH

IT WOULD be an insult to say that anime has finally arrived. After all, Japanese animation has been around for almost one hundred years, and it has been a cultural phenomenon around the globe for over twenty years. Yes, it would be an insult to say that anime has finally arrived. Sadly, it would also be a lie.

Although anime has achieved cult status in the U.S., and major cities can support both stores exclusively devoted to anime and manga (Japanese graphic novels) and conventions where "otaku" (rabid fans) gorge themselves on cartoons, comics, and costumed play-acting, the great majority of Americans are still blithely unaware that there is a world of animation beyond the wholesome, song-filled, and totally predictable buddy adventures put out by major American studios for tykes and their significant elders.

Okay, Pokémon and Digimon made a definite blip on the American consciousness. But they fit more readily into the expected Disney mold. The more adult, or at least more complex, tales coming out of Japan seem incapable of making a major impact on the U.S.

Several years ago, I remember, I first saw *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), a cyberpunkish thriller that is also a theological rumination on the nature of the soul. The art of it blew me away. The action sequences were impressive, but I had expected that. What surprised me was the intricacy — what others might call convolution — of the storyline and its philosophical underpinnings. I remember thinking (and writing) at the time that the film would have a significant impact on animation and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the American movie-going public. Well, the former might be true, but the latter? Not hardly.

Every year or so, a *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* or a *Metropolis* or a *WXIII: Patlabor the Movie 3* will get a brief release in this country. But few anime make it outside of New York, L.A., and the festival circuit. And those that do get no promotion and generally fade away rapidly. Whether I like a particular anime or not, part of me always hopes it will become a "surprise hit" just so that more anime will see the light of a darkened American theater. So far, that hasn't happened.

This Spring, my hope-it-does-well feature was *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie (Knockin' on Heaven's Door)*. Like many anime features, *Cowboy Bebop* started out as a Japanese TV series. Since its 1998 debut, the series has built a large cult following, even in this country. DVDs of the series have done well with anime devotees, and the show has also appeared for the last couple of years on the Cartoon Network. (Although because of its adult — if not overly graphic — content, it is on in the middle of the night during the network's "Adult Swim" programming hours.)

With a built-in audience, I was hoping that *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie* would break through to the general public, not just as a representative of anime, but because it is an entertaining sf film. Alas, as I write this piece, it doesn't look like that's going to happen. But I can tell you about it anyway, to support the Blockbuster rental action in the days to come.

An extension of the series (with a storyline that is supposed to take place between the 22nd and 23rd episodes), the film features the small and quite diverse crew of a modified interplanetary trawler dubbed the *Bebop*. The "cowboy" of the title refers to the slang term for bounty hunters — which is what the folks on the *Bebop* do for their (meager) living. The central characters include Spike Spiegel (English voice by Steven Jay Blum), a lanky cynic who sounds like Sam Spade and looks like a mod hipster from the 1960s; Jet Black (English voice by Beau Billingslea), a former cop who's a cross between a clinically depressed Mr. T and The Bionic Man; Faye Valentine (English voice by Wendee Lee), a standard anime cutie with perky grapefruit-shaped boobs and tiny pert mouth, who also has a gambling habit and a bad attitude; Edward (English voice by Melissa Fahn), an annoying young androgynous girl with a sing-songy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

voice and a genius for hacking; and Ein, a data dog in the guise of a corgi.

It is 2071, and most human society has moved away from Earth. One large colony is located on Mars, where Alba City looks amazingly like present-day New York — with a few touches from Asia and Northern Africa, plus an Eiffel Tower flourish. Law and order is supposed to be maintained by the corrupt Inter Solar System Police (ISSP). But crime syndicates, along with the military industrial complex, really seem to control things. Rather than clean things up, the government relies on "cowboys" to capture especially troublesome criminals for a fee. The bounty hunters have their own TV show, called *Big Shot*, which gives them the rootin' tootin' details on the latest most wanted.

The villain du jour is a brooding type who exploded a tanker truck on the freeway, triggering some sort of deadly virus. The Beboppers should have a leg up on this manhunt, since Faye actually witnessed the explosion. But there wouldn't be a reward of 300,000,000 woolongs if this were an easy case.

Like the TV series that spawned it, the movie of *Cowboy Bebop* is a marvelous hodgepodge of hardboiled mystery fiction, science fiction action, and tragic love story, with more cultural influences than you could possibly list — although Bebop otaku certainly have tried on their numerous fan websites. Since a great many of the pop cult references (whether visual, verbal, or musical in Yoko Kanno's vibrant score) are American, U.S. audiences should have a field day with this movie. But with an R rating, this is not the kind of thing Mom and Dad want to take the kiddies to. And the bioterrorism storyline (although devised prior to 9/11 and the Weapons of Mass Destruction hysteria) comes a little too close to reality for many Americans at the moment.

It's a pity, really.

Cowboy Bebop isn't a perfect film, it's true. It drags a bit in the middle, just as you would expect a feature-length film based on a half-hour TV series would do. And not all the beloved series characters get enough to do in this particular adventure. I didn't miss seeing more of the grating wee Eddie, but I would like to have seen a bigger role for Jet, and I wish Faye hadn't spent so much of her time bound and dishevelled on a floor. (Yeah, I know the teen boy audiences probably enjoyed that part, but they aren't writing this column.)

If Faye was relegated to a minor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

role, there is at least another kick-ass woman who joins the cast long enough to have it out with our hero, Spike. Her name is Electra (Jennifer Hale), and she is a military commando who seems to have a past with the terrorist, Victor Volaju (Daran Norris).

Although this movie will mean more to the folks who love the TV series, prior Bebop experience is far from necessary. This should be a very pleasant diversion for anyone who enjoys animation and science fiction. Besides the main feature, directed with great energy by series director Shinchirio Watanabe, there are two additional sequences — movies within a movie — that are alone worth the price of admission or rental. One is Hiroyuki Okiura's title credits sequence, and the other is an animated rendition of an old film western, done by Tensai Okamura. Neither is essential to the plot of the film, but they are such gorgeous little animation gems that they help make this film a delight to watch.

Sad to say, more people will probably see Shinchirio Watanabe's shorts in the *Animatrix* collection than will see *Knockin' on Heaven's Door*, the Cowboy Bebop movie. Ah, well. Perhaps *Animatrix* will bring Watanabe new fans. We can hope. Just like I can pray that the Oscar for Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* will hearken a new day for American appreciation for Japanese animation.

Miyazaki is in a class by himself, of course. The House of Mouse (and its subsidiaries) were smart enough to recognize a genius when they saw one, too. Although one could argue with the way Disney has marketed Miyazaki, just as you could question some of the choices made in the English voice-work on the Disney releases of Miyazaki's films, I am not in the mood to second-guess anyone willing to try to hook Americans on the work of this incredible filmmaker.

I am especially happy that Disney has finally released some of Miyazaki's earlier films on American/English language DVDs. *Kiki's Delivery Service* was especially high on my personal list. With good reason. It's a delightful tale of a young witch coming of age, learning to recognize her own talents, and striving to serve her community.

Miyazaki has said that he is concerned about the fact that young girls seem ignorant of their cultural heritage and show a general lack of self-esteem. Well, all I can say is that all those academics who worry about Reviving Ophelia better take

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a lesson from this aging gent from Japan. Miyazaki's girls aren't just revived, they're resplendent! Kiki is a marvelous example. So, too, is young Chihiro (Daveigh Chase) in *Spirited Away*. She starts out the film as a peevish and frightened little girl, afraid to enter an abandoned building or let go of her mother's hand. And she is equally petrified at the thought of living in a new home and starting a new social life in a new school.

All that changes when she and her parents innocently invade an amusement park of the spirit world and decide (big mistake!) to chow down at a feast they happen upon. Chihiro's gluttonous parents are transformed into pigs. To free them from their porcine enchantment, our spindly-legged young lass must bravely enter a hostile, sometimes even horrific world and triumph there. She does. And by the end of the movie, she knows that she can handle anything life can dish out.

Miyazaki's animation is breathtakingly beautiful and incredibly intricate (and except for a couple of water and bubble effects, entirely and painstakingly hand-drawn). But the filmmaker is equally talented as a storyteller, weaving Japanese fable and folklore into a plot that is unabashedly moralistic.

The filmmaker doesn't simply want his heroines (or heroes) to flourish. It's not about self-worth based in empty pride and entitlement. Miyazaki's protagonists learn to take responsibility not only for their own actions, but to try to work for the common good of all. Environmental (almost luddite-like) messages are common to Miyazaki's work. *Princess Mononoke* practically slugged you over the head with them! Which is one of the reasons that is not my favorite Miyazaki film. But even in his latest Alice in the Wonderland Bathhouse parable, the sensei slips a few of his life lessons in, just a little more subtly.

For example, when a dreaded Stink Spirit comes to call, it spews forth foul waste, garbage, and old bicycles as Chihiro tends to its bath. After a ritualized cleansing, it turns out that the Stink Spirit is nothing more than a miserably befouled River Spirit in need of a little help from its friends.

Unfortunately, girl power and Earth Day sermons aren't enough to make people watch a movie. Is winning an Oscar? I hope so. Because some of the best science fiction and fantasy films in the world are coming out of Japan. They call it anime. But you can just call it first-rate filmmaking.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Richard Paul Russo is the author of six novels, the most recent of which is Ship of Fools. *His too-infrequent ventures into the realm of short fiction (most of which were collected in* Terminal Visions*) tend to be darkly moody and his latest is no exception — it's a dark and potent vision of the not-too-distant future that might await us. This story first appeared in* Silver Gryphon *edited by Marty Halpern and Gary Turner, the recent anthology from Golden Gryphon Press.*

Tropical Nights at the Natatorium

By Richard Paul Russo

THEY CAME AS THE SUN disappeared and the sky turned from blood red to deep violet-blue and the stars came to life with a hard and shiny light. They arrived in gyro-pods, dropflyers, and humjets, and some even in armored ground vehicles (adding an extra edge of excitement to the evening), emerging from the nearby ruins with headlights marking the way along roads no longer maintained, entering the heavily manned security station, then finally passing with a shimmer through the encrypted energy barrier to park on the cleared lot of crushed shells just outside the transparent walls of the natatorium.

The Samarra Natatorium stood at the edge of the sea, surrounded by the ruins of a once thriving neighborhood that had been forsaken some decades earlier. A quarter mile to the north, a muddy river flowed into the sea. The natatorium was an extensive complex of interconnected swimming pools, spas, and rejuvenation ponds fed by thermal mineral springs, all enclosed in a structure built of faceted steelglass. Eight hundred people could comfortably take their pleasure in the natatorium, bathe in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

warm waters believed to have antiaging and aphrodisiac properties, or simply indulge in alcohol and narcotics and socialize with their peers throughout the long and sweltering nights. During the week, three or four hundred would come each evening, but on Friday and Saturday nights more than a thousand men and women would crowd in and stay until dawn. It was the place to make one's appearance that summer—it was the place to renew acquaintances, the place to meet new people, the place to eat and drink too much, the place to indulge appetites of all sorts. That summer, it was the place to *be*.

As night fell, McDermott approached the natatorium on foot, alone and unarmed. The bioluminescent glow from the structure's interior spread throughout the nearby ruins, casting unnatural shadows but providing enough illumination for him to make his way among the wreckage of deserted buildings, abandoned streets and alleys, derelict cars and mounds of stinking garbage. An electric buzz of insects saturated the hot and humid air, nearly drowning out the occasional animal yowl or piercing caw from birds in the upper reaches of the run-down buildings around him.

Stinking garbage? McDermott nodded to himself. Perhaps the ruins weren't quite as abandoned as they appeared. When he stopped and looked away from the natatorium and intently studied the buildings, he could make out faint gleams of light in some of the windows, and when he breathed slowly and deeply he could smell hints of cooking food cloaked by the stench of the garbage.

From the edge of the ruins, he watched the stragglers arriving by air and land, and studied the wide sterile buffer zone surrounding the natatorium grounds, the energy barrier, and the security drones hovering in the airspace above. He moved from building to building, keeping to the harsh shadows, coming around from south to north so he could view the resort from all angles. Through the semitransparent steelglass he could see the blurred images of people moving in an insectlike mass, and the large globes of bioluminescence suspended from the ceilings, giving everything a radiant cast. He learned nothing new.

As the Moon rose, he discerned in the distance a lean figure sitting by the riverbank, fishing. McDermott watched the figure for a time, then

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

emerged from the shadows and walked across an open stretch of sand and grasses toward the river. As he neared the river, the figure turned.

It was an old man, dark skinned with short white curly hair and a sparse white beard; he sat on a wooden stool and held a homemade fishing pole in both hands. The man seemed unconcerned and calmly watched McDermott approach. McDermott stopped a few feet away and greeted him.

"Good evening," the old man said.

"Any luck?" McDermott asked.

The old man leaned forward, picked up a chain staked to the ground beside him and raised it out of the water. One tiny silver-streaked brown fish hung limply by its mouth from a closed loop of wire. "Oh, yes," the old man said with a smile. "Poor." He dropped chain and fish back into the water with a quiet splash.

McDermott stepped closer and they shook hands and introduced themselves. The man's name was Samuel Latu and he'd been fishing since dusk and would probably be there all night. It was too hot during the day for the fish, which apparently napped while the Sun beat down on the water. So he fished at night.

"A man has to eat, yes?" Samuel said.

McDermott nodded toward the glowing natatorium in the distance. "They eat just fine."

"Yes," Samuel replied. "I am not one of them, however, so I'll just stay here for a while. And you?" he asked. "Are you one of them?"

"Do I look like one of them?"

"Yes and no," the old man said. He cocked his head, studying McDermott. "I think you *were* one of them once — a man of prestige and power. But now you've chosen to go your own way."

"That's an interesting notion."

He shrugged. "It's just a guess."

"Do you watch them much?" McDermott asked, nodding toward the natatorium.

"I watch them come and I watch them go. There is a kind of beauty to their vehicles in the air. What they do inside, however, is ridiculous and of no interest to me." He rested the fishing pole in a makeshift holder driven into the ground beside him, and took a single cigarette from his shirt pocket. "This is the last, or I would offer you one."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't smoke," McDermott said.

"Ah, better for both of us." He lit the cigarette and smoked in silence for a time. "Why are you out here?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "Taking the air?"

McDermott chuckled. "I haven't heard that expression in a long time. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever actually heard it. Read it, more likely." He nodded. "Yes, just out for a stroll."

Samuel turned and jerked his fishing pole, then waited several moments before shaking his head. "Nothing."

"I'll leave you to your fishing, then," McDermott said. "Good night."

"Good night," the old man replied.

McDermott turned and walked back toward the ruins.

TWO NIGHTS LATER, well after midnight, he returned carrying a rucksack with two packs of cigarettes, sandwiches, and coffee. The natatorium was aglow, its light reflecting from the listless waves that washed up the gentle slope of beach. He spotted the old man on his stool at the same bend in the river, and walked out to join him.

"Luck any better tonight?" McDermott asked.

"Worse," Samuel answered.

McDermott opened the rucksack, took out the cigarettes and handed them to Samuel.

Samuel examined the cigarettes, then looked up at McDermott. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing."

Samuel regarded him thoughtfully, then said, "Why do I believe you?"

"Because it's true."

"That must be it."

McDermott dragged over a driftwood log from nearby and sat on it beside the old man. He brought out the sandwiches and they shared them as they watched the river and the tip of the fishing pole, which never moved. When he brought out the coffee, Samuel nodded appreciatively.

Samuel sipped at his and murmured, "This is very good."

They drank coffee, and Samuel smoked cigarettes and talked while

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

McDermott listened. Samuel was eighty-three years old and lived on the second floor of a derelict townhouse just on the other side of the low dunes, with a view of the ocean and the natatorium. Three other families and a few other singles like himself lived in the townhouse complex, and they each had their own place. Plenty for everyone. No electricity, sewage, or running water, of course, but otherwise more than adequate. He had lived there for thirteen years, ever since his wife died. No children. There was family on the East Coast he hadn't seen in twenty years, and family back in the Sudan that he had *never* seen, or couldn't remember — he had come to the United States when he was fourteen.

"And you?" he asked McDermott. "Where do you live?"

"Nowhere for very long."

"Family?"

McDermott just shook his head. He didn't want to talk about family, he didn't want to talk about himself at all. Samuel seemed to sense and accept that, and asked no more personal questions.

Sometime later, Samuel caught a large rainbow trout with several cauliflower-like growths near its tail.

"Is it safe to eat?" McDermott asked.

Samuel coughed out a laugh. "I'd guess nothing I catch in this river is safe to eat. But I'm an old man, so it can't matter much. I'll eat it."

Near dawn, he caught another fish, smaller but completely normal in appearance. "You've brought me luck," Samuel said.

McDermott stood and shouldered the rucksack. "I need to go."

"Thanks for the cigarettes and the company," Samuel said. "Both are appreciated."

A dropflyer flew overhead, continued out over the ocean, then swung around, headed back in toward the natatorium to pick up passengers it had presumably dropped off early in the evening.

"Entertainment's over," McDermott said.

"It's never over for them," Samuel replied.

Watching the dropflyer land, and figures emerging from the bright lights of the natatorium to stagger toward it, McDermott said, "We'll see."

Posing as a management recruiter from out of town, McDermott frequented Financial District restaurants and cafés during the lunch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hours, and bars and lounges in the early evenings. It took most of the week, but he finally managed an invitation to join a small party of corporate attorneys who were going to the Samarra Natatorium that weekend. At nine o'clock Saturday evening, as darkness fell, he was on a rooftop pad with a young, handsome, and single intellectual property attorney, waiting to be picked up by the party's hired dropflyer. The man's name was Myricks, and he stood silently swaying, wearing a sleepy-eyed smile.

The dropflyer landed and they boarded, greeting the others and strapping themselves into the two remaining seats. The Financial District skyscrapers fell away from them as the dropflyer lifted off, pressing McDermott into his thickly cushioned seat; the buildings blazed with lights, the brightest pocket of radiance in the city that revealed itself to them as they rose and then accelerated forward, arcing out toward the ocean. Below them, the city was a patterned network of lights broken by large areas of near darkness. Within the dark areas, flickering lights appeared, the flames of drum fires and clustered candlelight and camp lanterns.

The dropflyer flew out over the ocean, bobbing up and down in the air like a carnival ride, then turned sharply and headed toward the natatorium. The pilot called in the access codes while the waves were still below them, then they were flying over wet sand, dry sand, then decelerating sharply into a shaky hover before finally descending and settling on one of the landing pads. At the door their IDs were checked, they walked through a series of scanners, and finally McDermott was inside.

It wasn't much different from what he'd imagined, but it was far larger. The rooms were vast, the ceilings thirty or forty feet above the floor, and each housed an enormous swimming pool as well as several rejuvenation ponds and numerous small spas for groups of five or six people at a time. Dozens of tables surrounded the pools, occupied by a mix of people in a bizarre array of swimsuits, evening wear, or the current rage of fluorescent body suits. Spheres of bioluminescent fluids, suspended from the ceiling, emitted a bright and silvery iridescent light almost imperceptibly tinged with pink. Flocks of colorful macaws flew among the spheres or perched on artificial tree limbs, a flagrant violation of the law.

Attendants moved among the tables and pools and the mingling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

crowds, carrying trays of champagne in fluted glasses and cocktails of seemingly endless variety, or pushing carts loaded with smoked salmon and oysters, stuffed crab canapés, caramelized tropical fruits, enormous prawns with caviar cream, seared duck livers, and much more, all with elegant, calligraphic labels.

After the members of his party withdrew to dressing rooms to change into swimwear, McDermott wandered from one room to the next, still surprised at the number of people — the pools were full, few chairs were available at the tables, and he had to fight through dense crowds to move from one place to the next.

A string quartet performed in one room, a jazz ensemble in another, a slash-and-burn band in a third, while other rooms were filled only with the overload of dozens of simultaneous conversations and the constant background splashing of bathers; a miracle of acoustics kept the music and other noises isolated within the individual rooms. Private booths were available for rent in some of the rooms, and most of these, too, were occupied, their curtains drawn tightly shut.

In one room was a tiered balcony high above the floor, with tables and lounge chairs and booths overlooking the pools. McDermott climbed a spiral staircase and there he finally found a small unoccupied table and took a seat. Next to him, a group of men lounged on a sofa and discussed the dearth of premium items that would be available at an upcoming art auction. A woman in a sharkskin dress stopped by McDermott's table and asked if she could join him. Unable to say no, he invited her to sit; her dress slithered as she moved a chair closer to him. It was going to be an interminable night.

By dawn, McDermott was exhausted even though he had indulged in nothing but mineral water, a few hors d'oeuvres, and mindless conversations too numerous to count. His pager chirped, alerting him that the hired dropflyer was on its way in to pick them up. He moved among the pools and spas and ponds, all of them nearly empty as people left or prepared to leave, the warm waters now pallid and cloudy.

Outside, the air was fresh, heavy with the smell of salt as a warm morning breeze came in from the ocean. The Sun was just rising in the east, peeking above the surrounding ruins, reflecting from the natatorium

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

windows in bright fiery colors. Three large armed buses filled with workers emerged from the ruins and bounced across the buffer zone, approaching the security station at the natatorium's service bays. McDermott looked toward the river but there was no sign of Samuel. He walked out toward the landing pads and joined his haggard party to wait for their ride home.

When he went to the river that night he brought two cartons of cigarettes and a pound of ground coffee. Samuel wasn't there. McDermott sat on the driftwood log and waited. He watched the murky river flowing past, and the air vehicles flying in and out of the natatorium, listened to the rustle of animals moving through the grass and kicking up sand; he walked up and down the river, then followed it out to where it widened and flowed into the ocean, meeting the waves and creating thick ropes of foam in a constantly moving backwash. The Moon rose, but Samuel didn't appear. At midnight, McDermott left.

The next night, Samuel was on his stool with his line in the water when McDermott arrived. McDermott gave him the coffee and cigarettes, and Samuel smiled, saying, "I don't smoke *that* much. Mind if I share them? They're scarce around here."

"They're yours," McDermott answered. "You can do what you want with them."

"Thanks."

McDermott sat on the log, facing the natatorium rather than the river, and poured coffee for them both. It was Monday night and the air traffic had been light; only two or three ground vehicles sat in the lot.

"You have something on your mind," Samuel said. "Something you want to ask me?"

McDermott drank from his cup, then turned to Samuel. "Yes, but I don't want you to misunderstand. The second time we met, you asked me what I wanted, and I said I wanted nothing."

"I remember."

"I meant it. I still mean it."

"But now you want something from me."

McDermott shook his head. "Not exactly. I'm expecting delivery of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

some specialized maps sometime tomorrow night. The maps are old, and things have changed around here since then, and I don't know this place at all." He nodded at the water. "From what I understand, that river isn't even on the maps."

"That river didn't exist ten years ago." He lit a cigarette without taking his eyes from McDermott. "You want me to help you find something on your maps."

"Yes, but I don't want you to — "

Samuel cut him off with a wave of the cigarette. "It's all right. What are you looking for?"

McDermott shook his head, saying nothing.

Samuel smiled. "I see, trust only goes so far. Well, that's understandable, we don't really know each other." He nodded. "I'll help you find it, whatever it is. Something new and different. That doesn't come along very often for me anymore."

THEY WERE TO MEET two days later, at ten in the morning in the lobby of the deserted Sunset Beach Motel. McDermott drove a small, rusted and dented truck, the enclosed bed filled with a variety of tools. He saw a few people on the streets as he wound his way among potholes and old appliances and bounced over cracked curbs, but by mutual agreement they passed one another with nothing more than nods. He parked in front of the motel and entered the sand-filled lobby, where Samuel waited for him.

They raised the blinds in the manager's office, cleared off the desk, and McDermott laid out his maps — an old city street map, a topographic map, and a Water Department survey map. On the Water Department map, two tiny blue squares were circled in pencil.

"That's what I need to find," McDermott said, pointing at the circled squares. "Either one. Don't have to find both."

Samuel studied the map, then looked up and stared at McDermott. "I know who you are," he said.

McDermott held his breath, wondering if it were true, and wondering what, if anything, Samuel would do if he did know.

"Who am I?" he asked.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Samuel just shrugged as if McDermott's identity were of little concern. "There's a substantial reward for turning you in," Samuel said. "And a severe penalty for aiding you." He turned his attention back to the maps and said, "Let's see if we can't determine where these are."

Everything appeared different in the daylight. The buildings, though dilapidated and run-down, did not have the appearance of ruins, but rather of a neighborhood that had fallen on hard times, sorely in need of basic repairs and maintenance but with the potential to be restored. Of course, McDermott thought to himself, the economics were never going to turn around for any of the people living here, and the place would continue to deteriorate. As they slowly drove through the streets, they met a few people on foot who called to Samuel by name, as he did to them. He had McDermott stop the truck while he talked for a few minutes with a young woman and her small child, asking how they were doing, and promising to stop by later in the day to check on their propane stove.

On the westernmost block, at the edge of the half mile of buffer zone, they parked the truck and Samuel asked to look at the maps again. He looked back and forth between the maps and their surroundings, then nodded once. They got out and Samuel attached a green flag to the broken side mirror. "This'll keep it from getting stolen or stripped," he said.

They walked around the corner of a two-story building that had once been a restaurant, and looked out at the natatorium. At this distance and in the bright light of midday, it appeared small and somehow lifeless, like a big greenhouse that had gone to seed.

Samuel led the way to a small cluster of tiny, shabby cabins at the end of a long, curving gravel drive. The cabins were ramshackle, with broken windows and doors, and rotten, sagging roofs; what little paint remained on the siding was faded, cracked and peeling. Each cabin had a small porch and a weathered rocking chair.

"Between the cabins, I think," Samuel said.

He was right. They found the round metal lid at ground level between the third and fourth cabins, half-buried by sand and dirt, hidden by overgrown weeds. The lid was about two feet across and rusted shut. McDermott returned to the truck and brought back a crowbar, hammer and chisel, a can of rust solvent, and a flashlight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In less than half an hour they had the lid pried open. McDermott, on hands and knees, could hear the bubbling of water and feel the damp warmth of the thermal springs. He aimed the flashlight beam down the concrete pipe and could just make out flashing reflections of water far below. He switched off the flashlight and lowered the lid.

They sat in a narrow strip of shade on the north side of the cabin. They drank coffee McDermott had brought, and Samuel smoked.

"What do you plan on dumping into the springs?" Samuel asked.

McDermott hesitated, then decided it didn't matter. Samuel wasn't going to turn him in. Or if he was, then it truly didn't make any difference what he told him.

"Two things," he finally said. "First, several drums of a concentrated chemical that slowly reacts with human skin over a period of an hour or so, staining the skin of anyone in the water a deep bright red. It will take days, if not weeks, to get rid of the color. It's completely colorless, so no one should notice it until it's spread throughout the pools. After that, a couple of drums of an extremely noxious compound that should permanently foul the waters, the pipes, the pools, everything inside the natatorium with an unbearable stench. I know someone who was able to calculate water volumes and dispersion rates, so I'm pretty sure the quantities I've got will be sufficient." He nodded once to himself. "That should put an end to their nights at the natatorium."

"When will you do this?"

"Saturday night. When it's the most crowded."

They sat in silence for a time. McDermott poured more coffee for both of them, and Samuel smoked another cigarette.

"I've been smoking more since I've met you," Samuel said. "You've made cigarettes too readily available."

"You haven't asked why I'm doing this," McDermott said.

"I know why you're doing it," Samuel replied. "I know why you sabotaged the cloud-sculpting festival in New Mexico, and created the snowmelt in Aspen during the Winter holidays, and sank that luxury casino riverboat in New Orleans, and all the other things you've done over the years."

"It's not some personal revenge or anything like that," McDermott said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, I didn't think it was. You're trying to change things. You're trying to wake up the wealthy and privileged. You're trying to make them realize that there's a price *they'll* have to pay, too, for the growing economic disparities, for their indifference to the ever-increasing numbers of the poor, for...well, for being such miserable and uncaring human beings."

McDermott had to smile in his surprise. "Something like that, yeah. You've thought a lot about it."

"Thinking about things like that was what I did for a living. For a while, anyway."

"Really? What did you do?"

"I was an economist. I worked as an economics analyst for the State Department. For Saharan Africa."

"I'm impressed."

Samuel shook his head. "I was completely ineffective at changing policy or helping anyone in those countries. I was just as ineffective at changing the way anything was done in the State Department. I finally gave up. Resigned."

"And after that?"

"I taught economics at MIT until they decided not to renew my contract because my politics were too disruptive. That was years ago. Now I have a simple life, I sit by the river at night, and I have more time to think than I've ever had."

"And what do you think about what I've been doing?" McDermott asked.

This time it was Samuel's turn not to answer. "Are we done here?" he asked. "I promised Consuela I would stop by her place."

McDermott got to his feet and glanced once more at the natatorium. "Yes, we're done here. For now."

Saturday night he drove his truck through the streets with the windows open and the lights off, creeping along by the light of the stars and the distant glow of the natatorium. As he headed up the winding drive to the cabins, he could hear the loud crunch of gravel beneath the tires. He backed the truck into position, got out, and was not surprised to see Samuel step out of the shadows. McDermott remained motionless,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

waiting to see if anyone else would appear, which *would* have surprised him greatly, but Samuel was alone. The old man approached and they shook hands.

"So it is tonight," Samuel said.

"Yes."

"You should poison them, you know," Samuel said calmly.

"What?" The words took him by surprise, so that he felt unsure of what he'd heard.

"You should poison them," Samuel repeated. "Take away those barrels you have in the truck, find sufficient quantities of poison, and then return here some other Saturday. Do it properly."

"Kill them?"

"Yes. Kill them."

McDermott shook his head, feeling a growing sense of discomfort. "Then I would be no better than they are."

Samuel shrugged. "That's irrelevant. You want to change the status quo. What you plan to do tonight will be nothing more than an irritation to them. Like some annoying pest. Like everything else you have done. If you want to change anything, you must do much more. Hurt them badly or they'll go on as before. They will just find another place to amuse themselves, and nothing will change." When McDermott didn't reply, Samuel went on.

"Nothing you've ever done has changed anything. Even more violent and destructive events brought about by others have had no effect on these people. Look at the water riots in Southern California last year, or the flooding of the subways in Boston after the transit workers strike. And all of the other localized disturbances, the lootings and arson outbreaks, more and more every year. Those with money won't change a thing until they're directly and severely affected."

"You would kill them?" McDermott said.

"I?" Samuel smiled and shook his head. "Oh, no, not at all. I'm not trying to change anything. *You* are." He sighed. "Now I try to accept things as they are, and live with them as best I can. Change is far too difficult and costly."

"The way things are *now* is too difficult and costly," McDermott said fiercely.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I would not argue that with you," Samuel replied. "Both things are true."

McDermott looked out at the natatorium, which gleamed like some fantastic and immense living jewel out on the sands. *Both things are true.* He felt a nascent fear rising in his chest and gut, fear of the reality of Samuel's words, fear of the implications. Fear of blood.

"There must be some middle ground, some way to effect change without resorting to killing and destruction."

"I think not," Samuel said sadly. "Not anymore. If there was such a time when that was possible, it has been gone for years. For decades."

McDermott shook his head, fighting the fear, struggling to crush it and eliminate it. He felt as though Samuel had excavated a truth McDermott had long known but had managed to suppress, and now he was trying to suppress it once again. "I'm not ready to accept that," he said. "Not yet."

"I understand. Someday, however, you will realize you have no choice. I suspect that day is coming soon. Then...well, I wonder what path you will choose."

Distressed but determined, McDermott went to the back of the truck and unlocked the shell cover and tailgate, revealing the large barrels, carefully packed to prevent them from rolling or crashing into each other.

"Let me help you with those," Samuel offered.

"Why? I thought you didn't see any point to it."

"That doesn't matter. I am here, and I am helping a friend with a difficult task. *That* is worth doing."

McDermott rigged up the makeshift ramp he'd prepared, then together they rolled the three large metal barrels down the ramp and along the ground to the edge of the hole. They carried the other two smaller drums between them, and set them back against the cabin wall. McDermott retrieved two respirators and two pair of neoprene gloves from the truck seat and handed one of each to Samuel.

"I brought extras in case you were here."

They fitted the respirators over their faces, pulled on the gloves, then McDermott raised the round metal lid, exposing the concrete-lined hole. With Samuel's help, he positioned the first barrel over the edge of the hole, propping up the bottom end on a concrete block so the barrel was tilted toward the hole, then unscrewed the wide cap.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The liquid emerged fitfully from the barrel until McDermott popped open the vent at the other end of the lid, then it flowed smoothly and quickly, a steady stream pouring down the hole and into the thermal springs. It took several minutes for the barrel to empty. McDermott and Samuel repeated the process with the other two barrels. They waited twenty, twenty-five minutes, then McDermott motioned for Samuel to keep back, and took care of the two smaller drums himself. The compound was thick but nearly clear, so that it seemed he was pouring pure water into the springs.

When both drums were empty, McDermott dropped the lid back over the hole, and the two of them moved back toward the truck, removing the respirators.

"Now what?" Samuel asked. "What about the barrels?"

"I'm going to leave them. I don't care if they find them. I *want* them to know it was deliberate. But we need to get away from here. I'm not sure how long it will take for this stuff to reach the natatorium, but it won't be *that* long."

They climbed into the truck and pulled away from the cabins. McDermott still drove without the headlights, but he drove more quickly now, and they bounced and banged over potholes and unidentifiable chunks of rubble.

"Where do you want me to take you?" McDermott asked.

"I know a place you can hide the truck," Samuel answered. "Then you can come to my place and watch the results of your work, if you like."

McDermott glanced at Samuel, thought about it for a moment, then nodded.

Samuel directed him down one street, then another, then eventually pointed the way to an underground parking garage beneath what had once been a supermarket. They parked the truck in the back corner, behind two concrete pillars, then walked back up the ramp and onto the street.

Samuel grabbed McDermott's arm and pulled him back into the shadows up against the supermarket wall. Moments later McDermott heard the thumping of a police dragoncopter, and almost immediately afterward they saw the flashing blue and white lights of the copter pass overhead, waves of heat distortion in its wake.

"It's started," Samuel said quietly. "We'll have to be careful."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They moved cautiously from building to building and street to street, sticking to the shadows whenever possible, listening intently for sirens and the sound of dragoncopters, holing up whenever one passed. Four more flew overhead as they made their way to Samuel's townhouse, and once they had to press themselves into a thicket of dense shrubs as an armored police cruiser rolled past with headlights blazing and rooftop searchlight beam sweeping the street.

They climbed the stairs to the second floor of the townhouse. In the darkness, McDermott couldn't see much, but he noticed there was no carpeting and guessed that it had all been torn out years ago. Samuel led the way to the front room with its large picture windows and sliding glass doors that opened onto a large balcony. The picture windows were cracked but still intact; the air coming in through the open doors was warm and humid, but refreshing as it broke up the still air inside the rooms.

Samuel had been right about the view. They were high enough to see over the top of the low, grass-topped dunes, with an unobstructed view of the natatorium aglow on the edge of the sea. Right now it was chaos, with dragoncopters circling the area, vying for airspace with dozens of private aircraft arriving and trying to land to pick up panicked clients who had called them back early. A few of the copters were on the ground, along with ground cruisers, ambulances, and haz-mat vans, while hundreds of people scrambled around outside the natatorium, swarming over the pads and making landing even more difficult. From this distance, the noise was a roaring confusion of shouts and high-pitched cries, thumping from the copters and whining from the pods and flyers, garbled orders barked out over speakers, and shattering glass and banging metal. He thought many of the people were still in swimsuits, but at this distance and with the crazed mix of lights and shadow and frantic motion everywhere, it was difficult to tell anything for sure.

McDermott felt surprisingly empty and uneasy. Samuel was right, there was something absurd and ridiculous about what was happening out there right now. It had the surface appearance of some kind of disaster, but in a few weeks it would all be forgotten except for the occasional ribbing of those who still bore traces of red stain on their skin, jokes told about the panic and the stench, and fond reminiscences of tropical nights at the natatorium. The natatorium would be closed down, but there would be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

some new place for the privileged to amuse themselves at night, some new source of indulgent pleasures, some new mode of excess.

He stepped out onto the balcony and leaned against the rail, unafraid of being seen — no one was searching this area, no one was doing anything right now except out at the natatorium itself, and it would be hours before things were under control there. Samuel joined him, bringing out two folding chairs. "No sense being uncomfortable," he said.

They set up the chairs and sat in them and watched the events playing out at the natatorium. Samuel put a cigarette in his mouth but didn't light it.

"There's some good in seeing all of those people scared and out of control for a while," Samuel said. "Too bad it won't last."

McDermott breathed in long and deep, held it for a few moments, then slowly let it out. "It's not enough, is it?" he said.

"No, it's not enough." Samuel took the cigarette from his mouth and looked at it, then turned to McDermott. "How old are you?"

"Forty-seven."

"Then you've been alive long enough to see many changes, but I've seen even more, and almost none of them have been for the better." He turned back toward the ocean. "This is the kind of weather we had in the Sudan when I was growing up, hot and humid like this, but it was never like this here when my family first came to this city, not even in the hottest of summers. Now, this is considered mild. Remember last summer?"

McDermott nodded. The death toll across the country had been astonishing.

Samuel gestured at the natatorium with his cigarette. "Those people don't understand what that means. Or if they do understand, they don't care. They think that as long as they have plenty of money, none of it affects them. What they don't understand is how wrong they are, and they won't understand that until it's too late." He sighed. "I think it's already too late."

McDermott felt the fear growing in his gut once more, stronger now. "You're a disturbingly wise man, Samuel."

"No. I've seen a lot in my life, that's all. As I said to you before, I've had a lot of time to think about things." He put the cigarette back between his lips and shook his head. "It does no one any good."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They remained on the balcony watching the spastic dance of air vehicles and the kaleidoscope of lights, the sliver of Moon moving slowly overhead, the waves curling up against the sand, and the river flowing through the night and into the dark, vast ocean like blood from riots and clashes and other struggles to come. Neither of them spoke again, for there was nothing more to be said.

MCDERMOTT RETURNED a week later and found Samuel by the river, this time without his fishing pole. He sat on his stool, but facing away from the river, looking out toward the natatorium, which was now little more than a hulking lifeless shadow against the beach and the ocean, the steelglass only dimly reflecting bits of light.

"I'm sick of fish," Samuel explained with a smile.

McDermott sat on the driftwood log and handed a key to Samuel. "This is for the truck. It's under the supermarket, where we parked it that night. I'm leaving, and I won't need it."

Samuel pocketed the key. "Thanks. It might come in handy."

"It's got a full tank of fuel. You should look at it soon, there are a few things in the back end you might be able to use." In fact, the back of the truck was filled with canned food, bags of rice, cigarettes, coffee, and first aid supplies, as much as McDermott could pack into it.

"Where are you going now?" Samuel asked.

"I don't know. I'll decide when I get to the train station. I like riding trains, and I'm not sure how much longer they'll be around."

"And when you arrive wherever you're going, what will you do then?"

"I don't know that, either. I'm afraid now, Samuel. I wasn't afraid before, but I am now." He stood. "Thanks for everything."

Samuel shook his head. "I don't think I did you any good."

"You were a friend. That was worth a lot." They shook hands. "Goodbye, Samuel. Take care of yourself."

"You too."

McDermott took one last look at the abandoned natatorium, then turned and headed toward the city, toward a future that daily grew more frightening and uncertain.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In our last issue we promised to bring you more science fiction this month, so we've given you time-travel, artificial intelligence, and social extrapolation. Now let's end the issue with a new tale on one of the oldest subjects in science fiction: a trip to Mars. John Carter was able to get to the red planet after falling asleep in an Arizona cave (or so Edgar Rice Burroughs told us in A Princess of Mars*) by closing his eyes and stretching out his arms. Alex Irvine's characters feel the pull of the red planet no less strongly, but their means of approach is a bit different...*

Mr. Irvine lives in Portland, Maine, with his wife and two children. His first novel, A Scattering of Jades, *won the Crawford and the Int'l Horror Guild awards earlier this year. His second novel,* One King, One Soldier, *is due out next summer. Several of his short stories were collected in* Rossetti Song *and a new volume,* Unintended Consequences, *is scheduled for publication this fall.*

Pictures from an Expedition

By Alex Irvine

Who are they kidding, man? Sure, she wanted to stay behind. And sure, she destroyed her VR rig. Ooooookay. I believe it.

— sockpuppet446, in Rod Shaver's Forum, 17 March 2012

THERE WERE THOSE WHO had argued caution. Wait until 2014, they said, when there will be unpowered return trajectories available. Wait until 2018, when the fast-transit trajectories are the best. Remember what happened to *Apollo 13*.

But it was 2009, and humans were going to Mars.

Fidelis Emuwa was one of them. His grandfather had been a miner killed in the Biafran War. His father survived to become a doctor in Waltham, Massachusetts. And now he was going to step onto another planet.

When he looked at *Argos I*, Fidelis Emuwa saw progress.

"And *Argos I* has separated from the International Space Station.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

You'll see now that it's rotating its thruster cones away from the station — a little astronaut's courtesy — before touching off the jets that will take David Fontenot, Jami Salter, Edgar Villareal, Katherine Yi, Fidelis Emuwa, and Deborah Green on humankind's first voyage to another planet. Wait — there's a transmission coming through from the pilot, David Fontenot."

"This is for my old professor Chapman: 'Happy he who like Ulysses has made a glorious voyage.'"

"Is that Homer there, David?"

"No, that's some sixteenth-century French poet, I think. Ask Dr. C. He — "

"Well, stirring words to begin mankind's journey into the uncharted paths of our solar system. Ladies and gentlemen, on November 17, 2009, humankind began our glorious voyage to the stars."

ROD SHAVER'S FORUM: What does the Martian expedition mean to you?

cosmo0omsoc> It means that we are going to settle once and for all whether we're alone. If there isn't life on Mars, there isn't life anywhere.

luvjamixox> It m33nz Jami Salter's going 2 bring « the sporz, & I want her 2 assiml8 me 1st.

sockpuppet446> It means that even when we go to Mars, we have to look like the cast of Sesame Street. I mean, come on. You've got your black guy, your Asian, your Hispanic. Three men and three women. And Deborah Green's Jewish, isn't she? Where are the Hindus and Eskimos? Jesus.

luvjamixox> Sesame St?

thebeaminyrown> It means that a hundred million people will starve to death who might otherwise have been fed.

sockpuppet446> Look it up.

chariot> It means, when you look in the face, the face looks back.

Eileen Aufdemberge looked up at the sky. I wish it was night, she thought. If it was night, I might be able to see their ship when they fire the engines. It would be like a star coming to life. Or like a last wave from the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

deck of the ship as it pulls away from the pier. She resisted the impulse to lift her hand.

"Mom?" Jared was there, looking where she was looking. "What do you see?" His ten-year-old face was puzzled. No face, thought Eileen, looks so puzzled as a puzzled little boy's.

"I was looking for your Aunt Debbie," she said, and his frown deepened.

"Come on, Mom," he said. "Aunt Debbie's over the Indian Ocean right now. You can't see her from here."

Thank God she hadn't waved, Eileen thought.

HotVegas betting lines on *Argos I*, 16 November 2009:

Odds on *Argos I* reaching Mars: 1 to 4
Odds on *Argos I* landing successfully: 7 to 5
Odds that the fuel plant and supplies will have survived their landing: 11 to 7
Odds that all six Argos crewmembers survive the mission: 3 to 1

"Three men, three women. What do you bet there's some serious space hubba hubba?"

"Except they say it's almost impossible to, you know, get a grip without gravity. I'm serious. NASA did studies and shit."

"Where there's a will, there's a way, man. I'm thinking, let's see, they'll pair off about the time they get past the Moon."

"If they haven't already. I heard there's an astronaut ritual, they pick someone to welcome the space virgin to orbit. So they must have figured something out."

"Fontenot's the pilot, he'll get first pick."

"Jami Salter."

<reverent pause>

"Damn."

"Then we have our minority representatives. Villareal goes with who, the Chinese girl or Debbie Green?"

"I'm thinking the Chinese girl. Yi."

"So that leaves the black guy with Green. Black and Green. What color will the kids be?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

<laughter>

<pause>

"No way he's going to be able to keep his hands off Jami Salter."

"Shit, man, that's why they brought the," <sound of knuckles on table> "NASA Nigger-Knocker!"

<louder laughter>

From the *New York Times*, December 30, 2009:

> "Given the fact that the crew was going to be together for two years, we thought it best that they come from a similar national background," explained Gates Aerospace spokesman Roland Threlkeld. "But, to avoid too much homogeneity, we deliberately sifted our candidate pool for potential Marsnauts who would represent America as a nation."
>
> Gates went on to deny accusations made by NASA and the Cato Institute that Gates Aerospace was more interested in a photogenic crew than a competent one. "Well, that's absurd. I can only guess that this kind of mud-slinging is a result of sour grapes on NASA's part. They've said from the beginning that a Mars mission couldn't be mounted sooner than their timetable, and here we are five years earlier. And the Cato Institute would blame affirmative action for the African origin of mankind."

Zero gravity made Jami Salter's bladder feel like it was about the size of a thimble. This wasn't a standard astronaut reaction, and she had done her best to conceal it from the years-long gauntlet of clipboards and lab coats she'd had to run to get here.

Some interplanetary sex symbol, she kidded herself. Running to the john every hour. But she was due to make the crew's daily media dispatch today, and she didn't want to be drumming her feet on the deck in front of the time-delayed pupils of Earth. The PR hacks at Gates had told her that her dispatches drew ratings fifty percent better than any other crew member's, and even though she knew this was just a temporary skewing of the audience composition toward young, male, and horny, she had come to feel an odd sort of duty to live up to the standard that had been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

set for her. So she washed her hair when it was her day to dispatch, and touched a little makeup here and there. Katherine and Debbie kidded her about it, but they knew the score, and Jami thought they were a little grateful that she was taking the pressure off them.

Said gratitude did not prevent them from nicknaming her Barbarella, though.

All in a day's work, when the day was spent working for the largest private space venture in the history of humankind. They were seventy-five million kilometers from Earth, and the time delay was now almost four minutes each way. The lag hung between *Argos I* and Earth as much as the distance itself. Every time they spoke to friends or family or (more often) media, it felt more and more like they were speaking to the silence and less like any real human beings existed on the other side of the commlink.

She had written those words down in a leather-bound journal she was keeping: *speaking to the silence*. It had been hard not to write them again. And again.

Barbarella is not coping, she said to herself.

Ebony Freytag, MSNBCNN: Jami, how do you like interplanetary space?

Jami Salter: Well, I haven't been outside in it, so all I can tell you is that it looks pretty much like space looks like from the Moon. (laughs)

EF: How big is Earth from where you are now?

JS: Tiny. About one-fiftieth the apparent size of the Moon from Earth, and shrinking all the time. And we're starting to be able to resolve Mars as a disk.

EF: Is the crew having any problems?

JS: It's surprising how little friction there has been. We're all getting along great. After all, it doesn't do any good to get angry out here; it's not like you can take a walk to cool off. All of us are very careful to talk out differences, make sure we know where the points of disagreement are and what can be done to resolve problems.

EF: One last question. How do you manage to look so great when

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you're seventy-five million kilometers from a beauty salon?

JS: Can't answer that one, Ebony. Us astro-girls have to have some secrets.

"How do I manage to look so great?" she asked Edgar and Katherine, who as usual were sitting just out of camera range commenting on the interview. They made an interesting pair, Edgar stocky and Mayan-looking next to Katherine, the tallest of the group and rail-thin except for a roundness in her cheeks. Jami kept thinking they looked like cousins, with their epicanthic folds and their identical spiky haircuts.

"I say genes. Katherine's got her money on plastic surgery and good lighting." Edgar pushed back from the table and jumped toward the stairwell that led up to the crew berths. He loved the low gravity. It brought out the monkey in him.

"Good lighting, in this can?" Jami looked at Katherine and they both laughed.

The commlink pinged. "Your adoring public," Katherine said, and winked.

"A Martian's work is never done." Jami tapped the screen to open the link.

<a split screen: Jami Salter on one side, Filomena Huxtable on the other. Running footers identify Jami as *ARGOS I* ELECTRONICS SPECIALIST; Filomena Huxtable is tagged as KTCM SCIENCE/CULTURE REPORTER. Behind Jami, the Argos common area: polished lockers, a microwave oven, a live camera feed of the Sierra Nevada. A studio audience is visible behind Filomena.>

F: So you're the mission electronics specialist.

J: That's right.

F: What does that involve, exactly?

<animated schematics of various missions systems pop up as Jami speaks>

J: Well, the success of our mission depends on our ability to communicate with each other and with Gates mission control back in Houston. My job is to make sure that the communications gear keeps working, and the navigational and laboratory computers, and basically anything else that uses electricity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

F: So when your hair dryer goes on the fritz, you'll be able to fix it.

<laughter from audience; Jami's smile tilts>

J: Well, we've all gotten our Mars cuts here, so nobody brought a hair dryer. But if anything goes on the fritz, it'll be my job to get it shipshape again.

F: Including the space suits? We hear you have all kinds of camera gear in those suits.

<as Jami speaks, various areas of the suit light up. Camera zooms in for closeups>

J: That's right. And monitors, and transmitters, and temperature control systems, and everything else needed to keep one of us warm and happy for three days.

F: Three days? I hope they're self-cleaning too. <louder laughs from audience> Seriously, those suits look great. Do you know who designed them?

J: I don't. That's not really my department.

<vid of Jami, with longer hair and a deep tan, modeling spacesuit without helmet; crowd erupts>

F: Well, honey, wearing them is definitely your department!

David Fontenot didn't want the Great White Hero label, any more than he sensed Jami was comfortable with the Mission Babe tag. But there it was, and he wasn't about to take a knife to his face or stop working out just so people would stop taking his picture.

Especially not now, when in less than six hours he and Jami would be the first human beings to set foot on Mars. They'd drawn straws, and when he and Jami had won. the reaction from the PR folks at Gates had been decidedly mixed. A photogenic first step was good, but a multiculturally photogenic first step was better. Would the crew reconsider, in light of their standardbearing situation, representing all nations and races, et cetera?

All of them remembered the lesson of *Apollo 11*: everybody remembers Armstrong. All of them wanted to be first onto the ground.

When the answer came back to Gates, it was negative. Fair was fair.

From David Fontenot's testimony before the Bexar County grand jury, July 11, 2012:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We all of us felt that the farther we got from Earth, the farther we got from any kind of connection with human civilization. Not that we were turning into barbarians or resorting to cannibalism; just that everything on Earth had stopped applying about the time we cleared the orbit of the Moon. The word *alone* doesn't even begin to describe it.

I read once the diary of a sailor who was marooned in the eighteenth century for killing one of his shipmates. He records his slow starvation, his efforts to find food and ration water. And he spends a lot of time thinking about his sins. The more he gets resigned to the fact that he's going to die, the more he starts trying to come to terms with what he's done wrong. He never admits that he was wrong for killing his shipmate, but he does think about all kinds of other things that he should repent.

I forget his name, but his diary was found next to his skeleton a long time after he died. All of us, during the time we spent on Mars, I think felt like we were writing a diary like that in our heads.

The odd thing was that nothing had gone catastrophically wrong. Every detail of the mission had come off more or less as planned, from separation from the International Space Station right on up to injection into Mars orbit and the exhilarating, exalted space of time when they had fallen out of the sky to a planet no human had ever touched. The ERV was where it was supposed to be, the power plant was churning out water and oxygen, the rocks cried out to be chipped and sampled and mined for new discoveries. Plants were already growing in the greenhouse next to the main station building. No group of explorers had ever been so well prepared.

So why, wondered Katherine, were they all so damned morose?

The commlink pinged. For Jami, most likely. It almost always was.

"They were supposed to encrypt us," she grumbled.

Fidelis shrugged and stroked his mustache. "I always figured someone would find their way through."

"I mean, we're on Mars, here. It's dangerous. Would help if the goddamn commlink didn't ping every two minutes with someone wanting to know Jami's goddamn cup size."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Katherine sighed. They had all just seen too much of each other during the transit. Gates had done the best it could to give them adequate living space and recreational facilities, but no matter how you sliced it, going to Mars still meant nine months in a tin can with five other people every bit as driven and opinionated and sure of themselves as she was.

"You think now that we're here, everyone will relax a little?" Edgar stood next to her looking out at the Valles Marineris. They had landed and set up at the head of the great canyon system, where its stupendous channel broadened out of the chaos of the Noctis Labyrinthus. One theory had it that sublimation of liquid water caused the landslides that pocked the canyon system's walls, and satellite observations predicted large amounts of water locked up in the crust. *Argos I* had come to find it, and to find out if Gates could make money exploiting it.

Eight hundred miles to the west-northwest, the giant shield volcanoes reared up: Arsia Mons, Pavonis Mons, Ascraeus Mons. A thousand miles beyond them, Olympus Mons. All of them, even Jami and David, dropped their voices a notch when saying those words: Olympus Mons. As if they all half-believed that the gods really did live there.

Which was foolish, of course. None of them were really religious. But *Olympus Mons....*

"I don't know, Ed," Katherine said. "I hope so. I hope everyone straightens out so we can really get some work done."

The strange Martian light caught the planes of Edgar's face. A mechanical engineer by training, he'd taken doctoral coursework in geology during preparation for the expedition, intending to use this unprecedented fieldwork as material for his dissertation. He always complained about being the guy everyone looked to when wrenches needed turning; when they got back to Earth, he said, he'd finish his Ph.D. and never touch a tool other than a rock hammer as long as he lived.

Argos's primary geologist was Deborah Green. She and Edgar and Katherine had been assigned a series of expeditions into the canyons to look for water and life. In that order. The Gates people realized the stir that life would make back home, but shareholders cared more about the commercial potential of water. In the words of Roland Threlkeld, Gates mission liaison: "Look for water. If you find life, great, but look for water."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Katherine, as the resident life scientist, tried to stifle her aggravation at the skewing of the expedition's priorities. They had fifteen months on Mars, until October of next year; plenty of time to indulge some personal hunches without the Gates people having to know and still get back to Earth for the New York Olympics in 2012.

Fidelis joined them at the window. The light did something odd to his face too; something about the texture of his skin that Katherine couldn't identify. He looked out at the landscape of Mars, and she could see the want in his eyes. "When are you going out?"

"Scheduled for tomorrow."

She watched him track the side canyon they would take the next morning down into the head of Valles Marineris. "I know you want to go, Fidelis," she said.

He nodded. "I wanted to go tomorrow. Way things are around here, I'm in all kinds of a hurry to get out."

This was a lot of emotion, coming from him. Katherine paused. He was the mission physician, but she was an M.D. too, and both of them had undergone training in psychology and psychiatry. "Are you okay?"

Fidelis cocked his head to the side when he looked at her. "None of us are okay, Katherine," he said. After another long look out the window, he headed for the door. "Good luck tomorrow."

From HotVegas, April 7, 2010:

Odds that the crew will find commercial quantities of water: 8 to 5
Odds that the crew will find evidence of vanished civilizations: 150 to 1
Odds that the crew will find microbial life: 3 to 1
Odds that the crew will find multicellular life: 25 to 1
Odds that the crew will be killed by Martians: 175 to 1

"Killed by Martians?" Deborah said incredulously. "Killed by *Martians*!?"

"I think it's a wonder the odds are only 175 to 1," Edgar said. "I figured every nutcase with twenty bucks to blow would push it down to 10 to 1 or so. Score one for rationality."

Deborah was never sure whether she should be taking him seriously.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Quoting odds on the Argos crew being killed by Martians was rational? Well, yes. It was. But betting...!

She scrolled through some of the other odds. "Well, now. This is interesting."

Odds that violence will break out among the crew: 1 to 3
as a result of sexual jealousy: 2 to 1
Odds that a crew member will be murdered: 12 to 1
Odds that the murdered crew member will be Jami Salter: 6 to 5
Odds that the murdered crew member will be Edgar Villareal: 3 to 1
Odds that the murdered crew member will be Fidelis Emuwa: 7 to 4
Odds that the murdered crew member will be David Fontenot: 8 to 1
Odds that the murdered crew member will be Katherine Yi: 5 to 1
Odds that the murdered crew member will be Deborah Green: 2 to 1
Odds that more than one crew member will be murdered: 22 to 1
Odds that the Argos mission will fail due to the murder of one or more crew members: 35 to 1
Odds that all six Argos crewmembers survive the mission: 9 to 4

Edgar came to look over her shoulder. "So you're more likely to get it than I am. What did you do?"

"You haven't heard?" She popped a new browser window and played a short video clip.

Ebony Freytag: So you've slept with Deborah Green.
Statuesque Blonde: On numerous occasions.
EF: And we're not talking about a pajama party here.
SB: <with a wink> Well, it never stayed that way.
EF: She doesn't seem like your type, does she?
SB: Deb? Honey, she's everybody's type.

"Yikes," Edgar said. "She looks a lot like Jami."

"For God's sake, Edgar, she's six inches taller than Jami and her eyes are brown." Deborah closed the window, cutting off a titillated, exultant roar from Ebony's studio audience. "I'm not only a dyke, I'm a slutty dyke. Who better to kill if there's going to be killing?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Edgar was looking over the HotVegas odds again. "Well, you're not as bad off as Jami and Fidelis." The commlink pinged.

"Half of the people on Earth who are in love with Jami would love to see her killed," Deborah said. "And a lot of the rest of them are figuring that Fidelis won't be able to keep his pants zipped."

Edgar laughed. "Fidelis? Our doctor-monk? Wonder what they'd say if they knew about us."

She laughed. "Well, when Ebony Freytag interviews you, make sure you tell her how happy I was to get out of *Argos* and back on the ground." Her hand found his, brought it to her mouth. "I sure am glad to have gravity all going in one direction again."

ROD SHAVER'S FORUM, July 30, 2010: Is Deborah Green a lesbian? Is she having an affair with Katherine Yi? Where does Edgar Villareal come into it?

cosmo0omsoc> All of you people are ignoring the most important thing.

godsavenger> WAIT AND SEE. NOT ALL OF THEM WILL RETURN. GOD WILL EXACT HIS JUSTICE.

luvjamixox> Justice?

godsavenger> THEY KNOWINGLY BROUGHT A SODOMITE WITH THEM. WHO KNOWS HOW MANY OF THE CREW SHE'S CORRUPTED BY NOW? DO YOU THINK GOD WILL STAND BY AND ALLOW THIS TO HAPPEN?

thebeaminyrown> No real Christian takes this kind of crap seriously.

chariot> When they come back, it won't matter whether they're gay or straight or what color or anything. What they bring back will destroy all of our petty disagreements, destroy religion.

godsavenger> YOU'VE ALL HAD YOUR CHANCES.

After all the time they'd spent looking for water, it was almost an anticlimax when they found the lichens in crevices on the sunny sides of Valles Marineris channels. Edgar and Deborah were conducting a hydrological assessment of a series of collapses in a canyon wall, and right before

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they were due to wrap everything up, she leaned over and said, "Well, I'll be damned."

"What?"

"I think this is lichen."

He went over to look, and it looked like lichen to him too, worked into the seams of individual rocks that had broken away from the canyon wall. They took a number of samples and went back to the rover wondering when it would hit them that they were the first people to discover life outside Earth.

Back in the lab, Katherine took the samples and ran some quick tests. "Sure enough," she said. "Lichen. I'm going to sequence the algae and pipe it back on the hotline."

That night, they were a little more boisterous then usual around the dinner table. David cracked a bottle of Laphroaig he'd been saving for a special occasion, and they toasted each other. "But did we find any water?" Jami cracked, and laughed a little too loudly at her own joke. Of course they all knew there was water, they could see traces of it wherever they looked, but their evidence of life was quite a bit more convincing than their evidence of water. Gates would be happy for the good PR, but their expectations were more geared toward long-term financial viability. And everyone at the table knew how expectations were beginning to oppress Jami.

InkStainedWretch.Com's Headline Search, August 30, 2010:

LIFE ON MARS!
Life on Mars
Life on Mars Questioned
Critics Question ET Claims
Wait And See on Life Claims, Experts Say
Mars Life Could Be Native to Earth, Scientist Says
Biotech Stocks Volatile on Mars Life Claims

Ebony Freytag, MSNBCNN: So you've discovered life on another planet.

Jami Salter: Well, I haven't personally. It was Edgar and Deborah.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Edgar Villareal: It was Deborah.

EF: Deborah Green, you're the first person to set eyes on alien life. How's it feel?

Deborah Green: Exciting. It's humbling. I'm not sure any of us have really gotten our minds around it yet.

EF: Jami, tell us how it happened.

JS: I wasn't there. You should really ask Ed and Deborah.

EF: We'll get the science from them later, don't you worry. But our viewers want to know what it was like.

JS: I can tell you it wasn't like I thought it might be. There we were, on Mars, with Martian life in our lab, and it was wondrous, but...well, we had a drink, toasted ourselves, danced around the campfire a bit and went to bed.

EF: There's a lot to do tomorrow, isn't there?

JS: Always. Always a lot to do tomorrow. So I should sign off here and let you talk to Deborah and Ed.

EF: I think we've about used our bandwidth, unfortunately. We'll get the science from the nets; I'm sure Deborah Green and Edgar Villareal will be only too happy to tell us their stories. Talk to you next time.

"Well, I guess we shouldn't be surprised, should we?" Edgar said when they'd broken the link.

Don't get angry, Deb told herself. You knew this would happen.

She kept her temper, but only just. Eileen, she thought. My little sister, tuning in to hear about her big sister who discovered life on another planet.

And getting Jami Salter.

"Sorry, Deborah," Jami said, and that was the worst of it, she was such a fundamentally decent person, and had the grace at least to be screwed up by the relentless attention focused on her. Still....

Ping.

"Fuck it, never mind. Why don't you get that? It's for you," Deborah said, and didn't think she'd snapped. "I discover life on Mars, they want to talk to you about it. That's how it works. We've known that for a while."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's just Ebony," Jami said. "You'll have all the tech nets after you." She laughed, short and bitter. "God knows they're not interested in anything I'm doing."

Ping.

Deborah exchanged a quick glance with Edgar, saw that they were thinking the same thing. Jami upset because she wasn't being recognized? She was an engineer; nobody ever recognized engineers unless the bridge fell down. And she was a pilot, and nobody ever recognized the pilot until the crash.

"Public figuring's a bitch," Edgar said. Deborah was startled. She could see Jami was too. Edgar, saying *bitch*?

They laughed, Edgar at his joke and the two women at him. Public figuring.

Ping.

HotVegas, August 29, 2010:

Odds that lichen is most sophisticated life on Mars: 175 to 1
Odds that the "discovery" is a hoax: 1 to 1
Odds that Mars lichen descended from Earth species: 4 to 1
Odds that Earth lichen descended from Mars species: 5 to 8
Odds that human beings are descended from Mars lichen: 7 to 5
Odds that all six *Argos* crewmembers survive the mission: 7 to 1

ROD SHAVER'S FORUM, August 29, 2010: Is it real? Does it matter?

chariot> Of course they discovered life. Does anybody out there seriously think they weren't going to?

thebeaminyrown> Does anybody out there seriously think they'd let us believe they hadn't? Come on. Gates needs this trip to pay off. Water's one way; ETBOs are another. And let's not forget that Gates has a piece of all vids, interviews, even books on all the crew. When D. Green talks to *Scientific American*, creds flow into Gates accounts. No way they were going to let an opportunity like that go by.

cosmo0omsoc> So you don't think they found anything?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chariot> Of course they found something.

thebeaminyrown> I don't know whether they did or not. It's possible. I'm just saying that we were going to be told they'd found something whether they did or not.

cosmo0omsoc> But it's lichen, man. Not like little green men or a big monolith or something.

thebeaminyrown> The ways of Gates are devious and subtle, amigos. Just keep your eyes open, is all I'm saying.

The sequence came back from the Gates database with three beautiful words: NO SPECIES MATCH.

"Life on Mars," Edgar breathed. For a while all of them stood around the sample containers watching the brown lichen.

Ping.

Ping.

Ping ping ping.

"We're watching brown lichen, people," David said presently.

InkStainedWretch.Com's Headline Search, August 31, 2010:

ARE WE ALL MARTIANS?
Panspermia Gets New Lease on Media Life
Humankind Not Descended from Martians, Pope Says
Society for Christian Medicine Floats *Argos* Crew Quarantine
Results Still Not Definitive About Mars Life
Lichen: Symbiotic Explorer

They spent the next two months absorbed in the problem of the lichen: where it grew, what could kill it, what made it grow, whether it performed the same ecological function on Mars that it did on Earth. Gates, of course, made sure that they spent most of their time looking for water, but hell, they'd found the original lichen while looking for water; it wasn't that hard to make one activity look like the other.

And they found water too.

Again Deborah was the lucky party. Late on a surveying mission, irascible from the grit of Martian dust in her underwear and her eyes and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her teeth and her socks, she'd said to herself: Fine. One more sweep. Fill out one more grid. Then back to base and I'm not going out for a week. A fucking week. No more peroxide taste, no more dust in the crack of my ass. Seven days.

Something rumbled below her feet.

She was forty meters from the lip of a canyon wall that dropped something like three hundred meters to a titanic jumble of fallen rock. Edgar was about a hundred meters away from her. Both of them dropped their instruments and ran toward the edge.

Deborah threw herself on her stomach and scooted forward until her head was hanging over the sheer drop. Below her, mist swirled above the rockfall at the bottom of the canyon. Carbon dioxide; they saw that all the time. They'd even seen water mist once in a while. Never water in commercially useful quantities, though. Never until this huge beautiful plume that came exploding out of the canyon wall two hundred meters below her pounding heart, eclipsing the carbon-dioxide mist in a thick fog of sublimating water.

She was screaming into her mike, and she screamed louder when the vapor cloud rose up to envelop her. The world went white, and Deborah opened her mouth and let the frustration of the past two months chase the joy, the never-to-be-repeated joy of this moment, out of her mouth and through her mask and into the thin wet Martian air.

"Deborah!" "Deb, Jesus!" "Deb! You there? Come in, Deb!"

"Toggle your cams to me!" she shouted. "God, look at this!"

She heard their exclamations as they saw through her cam. Water beaded on her mask, held for a moment by her body heat before it sublimated away. Something gripped her hand, and Deborah started before she realized it was Edgar, talking to her on their private channel: "You again, Miz Green. Lucky I have you around."

She squeezed his hand through their bulky gloves, and in that moment a ridiculous thought flashed through her mind: *Oh God I'd better be sure to shower before tonight or we're going to scrape each other raw.* She laughed out loud, and Edgar joined in. Over their mikes they heard the rest of the crew shouting, clapping each other on the back, calling them to come back in and start the celebration.

***

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HotVegas, November 9, 2010:

Odds that *Argos I* crew will suffer infection from Martian life: 1 to 4
Odds that Martian infection will kill *Argos I* crew member: 7 to 2
Odds that *Argos I* crew will carry dangerous microbes back to Earth: 2 to 5
Odds that all six *Argos* crewmembers survive the mission: 8 to 1

Late in the night, Edgar asleep beside her, Deborah remembered stepping out of the airlock into Bohlen Station and thinking as she did that she would really have to find out why Jami had suggested they call the station that. A character in a book, Jami had said.

Katherine had been there inside the airlock door with a puzzled expression on her round face. "Again," she said. "You, again."

Yes, Deborah had wanted to say. Me again. But the look on Katherine's face was so pained; she had wanted very badly to discover life on Mars herself, or at least to pronounce life absent, and then her grand moment was usurped by a geologist. Who then found water too. It was all a little much, Deborah thought.

"It's your work they're going to remember," she'd said to Katherine. "You're the one who did the sequence and all that. I was just in the right place."

"Thank you," Katherine had said. "Thank you for believing that."

ROD SHAVER'S FORUM, November 8, 2010: Ghoulies and Ghosties and...?

sockpuppet446> You heard it here first: one of them's already sick. They're going to cover it up, but watch and see if they all come back. They won't.
thebeaminyrown> Hooray, Shaver's paranoids are alive and well.
sockpuppet446> Whatever, beam. You wait until they come back and spread it to you.
chariot> Whatever it is, it couldn't be worse than the shit we've already got. I'll challenge any Martian microbe to ten rounds with HIV3.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

luvjamixox> Funny sh!t coming from u, chariot.
chariot> What they're going to bring back is much much stranger than we can imagine.

InkStainedWretch.Com's Headline Search, November 9, 2010:

WET MARS
Mars Crew 2 for 2
Gates Stock Up 37 Percent on Water News
GM, Airbus, Vishnu Ready Mars Plans
"Life Is Interesting, Water Makes Money," Says Chair of NSF
Ebony Freytag Sued Over Naked Jami Vid — Fake?

Ping.

It was never so good again. Once they'd found life, found water, basked in their accolades, there was still nearly a year to spend on Mars and seven months of sandpapering each other's nerves on the voyage home. The Gates scientific crew thought up more than enough experiments and missions to keep them busy, but their real work was done. They had established that Mars held both life and enough water to justify colonization. Already a dozen Mars colonies were moving from pencil-sketch imagining to nuts-and-bolts reality. In ten years, Mars would be utterly changed.

"We'd better enjoy it while we can," said David. "Who knows if we'll get to come back?"

"Would you want to?"

Jami's question surprised him. They were running the latest in an endless series of inspections of joints, hoses, bearings, and seals — anything that could be eroded by peroxides or clogged by dust. Which was to say, everything. They'd taken to doing it in pairs, and when it had become apparent that the pairs were rubber-stamping each other (after Katherine and Fidelis had both missed a badly corroded seal that then blew, freezing the station water supply), they'd taken to sending out pairs who weren't getting along with each other. This meant that Fidelis hardly ever got inspection duty, since everyone liked him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It also meant that David and Jami were at last going to have to get out into the open whatever it was that had been hanging between them since they'd been anointed *Argos I* media darlings. Or so, they both knew, Fidelis was hoping.

So here we go, David thought. "Yeah," he said. "I think I would."

Jami looked at him for a long time. The Sun was setting, the Martian landscape settling from golds and reds back into evening browns. There was enough dust on her faceplate that David couldn't see her expression.

"I bet you would," she said eventually.

Ebony Freytag's show became the crew's guilty pleasure. On a Tuesday in December, they watched as she devoted an entire show to random things her audience wanted to know about the *Argos* crew. Did they lose a lot of weight in space? Were they more religious than when they'd left? What were they really doing?

And why, someone asked, was everyone so heated up about David Fontenot when Fidelis Emuwa was so gorgeous?

"I guess Fidelis is a pretty good-looking guy," David said.

Katherine snorted. "Why do we watch this garbage? Just because they want us to be a sideshow. Why do we let them?"

The two of them were sitting in the common room. Fidelis came down from the dorm level. "Are we a sideshow?"

"When was the last time we got a call from someone other than Gates about either exobiology or water?"

David got up for a cup of tea. He wanted to stay to the side of this discussion. After his exchange with Jami a few days before, he'd tried to be more sensitive to the mood of the crew, and what he'd seen thus far wasn't encouraging. Holiday blues, he thought; all of us get a little crabby around the New Year. He hoped that was all it was.

Deborah came in from the direction of the lab. "Another day, another goddamn revolutionary discovery about Martian geological history. I'm sick of it."

"Maybe we should take a couple of days off," David said, and then wished he hadn't spoken. Where were Jami and Edgar? Edgar was probably tinkering with something, cleaning out a ball joint somewhere or changing the rover's battery terminals. Jami, who knew, Jami was doing her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Martian Bedouin-mystic thing somewhere nearby. She had enough to do keeping station computer equipment up and communicative, but recently she'd developed a tendency to wander off once things had reached a bare minimum functionality. Katherine and Deborah were getting sharp about it.

HotVegas, February 11, 2011:

> Odds that one or more *Argos* crewmembers has attempted suicide: 4 to 1
> Odds that one or more *Argos* crewmembers will attempt suicide: 2 to 3
> Odds that all six *Argos* crewmembers survive the mission: 6 to 1

David gathered the *Argos* crew in the station greenhouse. All of them liked it there. It was warm, it smelled good, it wasn't brown. "I think we ought to have a chat. All of us."

Everyone settled into a rough circle. David looked around the group, saw that Deborah wasn't next to Edgar and Jami was between Fidelis and Katherine. So they hadn't arranged themselves according to cliques. That was good. "Katherine," he said, "I know this is more your territory — "

"Fidelis is more of a psych guy than I am," she said. "I was a surgeon."

He let the interruption pass, then plunged ahead. "I'm concerned about our collective well-being here."

The wind kicked up, rattling dust and gravel against the greenhouse walls.

"So am I," said Fidelis. David was looking at him just before he spoke, and he saw Fidelis look quickly at Jami and then away. Worried about Jami? he wondered. Or is Fidelis worried about himself, and Jami's the reason?

"I think we're all worried," Katherine said. "We're on another planet, halfway through a three-year mission. It's lethal and ugly outside, and we're all sick of looking at each other, so inside isn't much better. All of this was in the mission prep. We knew it would happen."

Edgar cut in. "That's not the same as dealing with it when it does."

"But anticipating the problem at least gives us a basis for dealing with it," Fidelis said calmly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So let's deal," David said. "What do we need? I'll start. I need to play some euchre."

"What's euchre?" everyone else said more or less at once.

"Card game. It's simple. I used to play with my dad and my uncles up in Petoskey. I've been playing on the computer, but it's not the same. I miss it." He looked to his right, where Deborah was picking dead leaves from a grapevine. She kept picking, but he could see her thinking.

"I need Edgar to leave me alone for a while," she said.

From the *Washington Post*, March 13, 2011:

THE FADING FAD OF MARS
by Allen Holley

During the six weeks before *Argos I* left the International Space Station, the bandwidth of the developed world crackled with nothing but Marsnauts. During their voyage to the Red Planet, we worried how they would get along, if they would fall in love; we bet on the possibility of their failure; we spent our free time pouring information about Jami, David, Deborah, Edgar, Katherine, and Fidelis into our heads.

I thought it would peter out before they got there. Interest would spike again once they landed, of course, but apart from that and another flurry of information if they discovered something exciting — little green men or underground rivers or veins of iridium — but beyond that, I figured that the obsessive persistence of American consumerate was of fairly short duration.

I was wrong.

We have been gaga over the Marsnauts for much longer than I ever would have guessed. Chatthreads devoted to Deborah Green's sexual orientation unspooled posts in the millions; viewership of talk shows that took Jami Salter as their subject exceeded the number of eyeballs trained on last summer's World Cup in South Africa; applications to *Argos* Marsnauts' alma maters are up more than one hundred percent since the selection of the crew.

So yes, I was wrong.

I can admit this because we are, at last, beginning to forget.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bandwidth consumption at all the newsnets is down, or at least redirected to the pipes carrying the Chinese incursion into India; Ebony Freytag is stinging from the lawsuit; the various chat forums, if not exactly quiet, are no longer as riotous as they were in the halcyon early days of Mars-mania. This despite the fact that the crew of *Argos I* has in fact discovered extraterrestrial life, throwing biology (and religion) on its collective ear, and begun to map huge quantities of water under the planet's surface, meaning that colonization has abruptly become a question not of if but of when.

They have been amazingly successful. And we are starting to ignore them. Part of me can't help but think it's a relief.

"Deborah," Edgar said. She snapped a tendril from the vine.

"David asked what we need. I'm telling you. I tried to think of something else, but that's it. I need you to leave me alone for a while."

Edgar stood very still for several seconds before picking up his tool belt.

"Edgar," David said before Edgar could leave. "Please stay."

After a pause, Edgar put the tool belt back on the work table in the center of the greenhouse. "Thank you," David said, trying to keep the real gratitude out of his voice. Things were getting very deep very fast, and he had to make sure the gathering didn't fly apart. "Katherine?"

"I would like you to ask Gates to give us more leeway in running experiments. The schedule is still predicated on searching for life that we've already found, and I'm wasting valuable time running useless experiments because people back in the Gates labs have already arranged to publish the results."

David nodded. "Okay. Let's do it this way: you start reporting to me, and I'll send abstracts of your results to Gates. I'll take the heat."

"Thank you," Katherine said. "Also I would like to learn how to play euchre." She smiled at him, and in that moment he could have kissed her. Whatever she said about Fidelis being the psych guy, Katherine knew the thin line David was treading, and she was doing her best to help.

"That's two things," he said, "but we are a resilient enough crew to handle them both, I think. Jami."

"I need everyone to stop looking at me like I'm going crazy."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There was a long pause.

"And I need people to please stop getting so quiet when I talk," Jami added. "Please."

Dear Ms. Salter,

I am a sixth-grader at Fred P. Hall Elementary School in Portland, Maine. I want to go to Mars some day. Can you tell me what college I should go to? I want to be a pilot and make sure aliens don't take over Mars or come to Earth. Will they let me do that even though I still have to wear glasses because my mom won't pay to burn my corneas?

Sincerely,
Megan Machado

"Noted," David said. "We got it. You aren't crazy, and we'll start interrupting you. Fidelis?"

"We're all too alone," Fidelis said. "I need everyone to start talking to each other again...no. I need everyone to start listening to each other again."

Leave it to Fidelis to be level-headed and precise, David thought. Carrying around his own self-assurance, a banked coal hidden from the winds that tore through the rest of them.

Or he was just deep, deep water, with all the turbulence down there in the dark.

"You heard the doc," David said. "Everybody start listening. We're all talking — hell, I talk all the time — but we're talking to ourselves." Greenhouse spring, he found himself thinking. A little island in the midst of so much cold and dark. A little spring, like the one they were all missing on Earth. "I think we need to get control of this," he went on. "As of tomorrow, we resume burst transmissions back to Earth. No more recording and storing; we send everything live."

"Gates won't run it," Deborah said.

"I don't care if Gates runs it or not. We all need to know that someone knows we're out here. When we just record and store for the backup pipe, we're talking to ourselves. Starting tomorrow, we talk to Earth again."

"And I guess we'll find out if Earth wants to talk to us," Jami said. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, for Christ's sake," snapped Katherine, "you're the last person around here who should worry about that."

Jami was nodding before Katherine finished her sentence. "Right, you're right. It really helps knowing that they all *care* so much about me. How can I be lonely knowing that so many people *care*?" Her voice throughout was soft, and when she finished speaking she got up and pushed through the door that led back to Bohlen Station.

David watched her go. When the door had settled shut behind her, he surveyed the four people left in front of him.

Only Deborah was looking back at him. "She's cracking up, David. You need to do something. She named the station after a schizophrenic mechanic in an old science-fiction novel, for Christ's sake. Doesn't that worry you?"

"Katherine?" David said. "Fidelis?"

The two doctors looked at each other. David couldn't tell if some kind of secret physician's exchange was passing between them. After a moment, both shrugged. "She's been under a lot of pressure from the beginning," Fidelis said. "It's a good sign that she's still performing all of her work."

"But barely," Katherine interjected.

"That's true of all of us," said Fidelis. "None of us is working anything like we did our first few months here."

David stepped back in. "If Jami, or anyone else, starts leaving critical work unfinished, someone tell me right away. I'll keep an eye out, but the water separator's a full-time job lately. I need people looking out for each other. None of us can afford to crack. Stay together, people."

It was the moment to end the gathering, mission mostly accomplished, crew refocused and given a little momentum to get through the day. Right then David realized he'd forgotten to ask Edgar what he wanted.

Edgar Villareal, interview with Bruce Pandolfo of *700MHz*, June 9, 2065:

> It's odd to be the last one alive. When we went to Mars, I think we all figured we were immortal. Along the way we figured out that we weren't, and realized how awful it would be if we were. Jami couldn't handle it. David could, he was always better at that kind of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing. I know I was glad to have both of them sopping up most of the attention before it got to me. Remember, I was only 3-1 to be the murdered crew member. Jami, Fidelis, and Deborah were all way ahead of me. People paid more attention to them. And David.

Anyway, I figured half of us would live to be a hundred. Now here I am, ninety next weekend, and I'm the last. And it's sad that three of us...Fidelis's accident was almost a relief after hearing about David and Katherine and Deborah.

For three days the wind did not blow. Sand and dust settled in gentle drifts around the camp. Fidelis spent each of those three days immersed in his work, keeping himself away from the windows. He wanted to go outside, but he didn't want to see what he knew would be there.

Blow, wind, he said to himself, and felt creeping unease. Madmen on a dead red heath, that was all of them. Blow, wind. He steeled himself to resist Mars. If the wind would not blow, neither would Fidelis Emuwa go outside. He could outwait the planet. It could not break him.

You're personifying, he told himself. You're seeing agency in randomness. That's what they call paranoia.

Finally he couldn't stand it any more. He suited up and went outside into the absurd stillness. The sky was bright and clear. His footsteps crunched as he walked around to the back of the greenhouse, where he'd seen Jami writing in the sand three days before, after David's meeting in the greenhouse. Writing, brushing it away, writing again.

Between his feet, the words: *speaking to the silence.*

Fidelis knelt and brushed them away.

The first day nobody called was hard on all of them. Except Jami.

"Twenty-four hours and no ping," she announced with a broad smile. "It only took a year and a half. Longer attention span than we thought they had, I bet."

"By about a year," grumbled Katherine, who Edgar figured was grouchy because Gates hadn't gotten back to her about her proposal to go into the lava tunnels looking for life other than the scrawny lichen that survived in cracks in canyon walls. He wanted to do it too, but until today he hadn't figured Gates would let them. Too much to lose. Now that the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dataflow from Earth had slowed to a trickle, though, he thought Gates might change its mind. They'd be looking for something to rejuvenate news coverage. Katherine wanted to go, but she also welcomed the relative peace and quiet.

Far as Edgar was concerned, anything that got him out of Bohlen Station and away from Deborah (for weeks now he'd been thinking of her as *that bitch Deborah*, but he was beginning to get over that) more than justified whatever risks arose. And away from Jami, who had suddenly begun to act like she was on the vid all the time. Of course, all of them were on the vid all the time; they'd agreed to sell "uncut" VR of the voyage as part of their contract with Gates. The feeling Edgar got, though, was that she had started playing a part. She was playing Barbarella the Mission Babe again, only now it was for her colleagues instead of Earthside media.

He wondered if she'd forgotten how to be herself. If somehow the intensity of the news coverage had overwhelmed whatever natural person had existed before they'd all become Marsnauts. Edgar thought back to training and their early publicity junkets. He'd liked Jami. She'd been at ease with everyone, able to joke about herself without seeming to make a point of it. The cameras found her, and the rest of them were grateful, even Edgar, who had once wanted to be an actor. He quickly found that they needed Jami to take the pressure off them. They would all have imploded long ago if she hadn't done that.

"Now we can go back to being the anonymous discoverers of life beyond Earth," he said.

Jami flashed him a grin. "Thank God. You doing anything today?"

"Not unless Katherine gets the go-ahead to check out the tunnels."

"Then come with me. Reactor sensors are due for inspection."

"Let's do it." Anything to get out of here, Edgar thought again.

The Quiet Day, as it became known around the station, turned out to be an anomaly. Apparently people on Earth were still interested. But where before they'd struggled to answer the flood of scientific and media inquiries, now they found that most of their incoming volume was kids looking for help on science projects and lonely postgrads wishing they were on Mars instead of in Ann Arbor or Heidelberg or Jakarta. "It's official," Deborah said. "We're a niche."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On Jami's birthday, August 22nd, she took off on a long solo hike. David almost didn't let her, but there was only so much he could do, and he settled for making sure that she had twenty-four hours of oxygen and a tested distress beacon. She's an adult, he said, and if she's going to kill herself I can't do much about it.

The more he watched her, the more convinced he was that she would be better once they'd all gotten on their way home. Surrounded by the empty red immensity of Mars, David thought, memories of Earth started to get a little abstract, like something he'd done once and might someday do again.

Deborah, Katherine, and Edgar were shouting at Fidelis when David came back in from doing the final check on Jami's suit. He got in among the four of them and calmed things down enough to get a sense of what was going on. It was cold in the station, something wrong with the thermostat, and he could see his breath.

"She's up to something," Edgar said. "And he knows what it is."

"Up to what?" David asked. He caught Fidelis's eye and tried out his telepathy: *Is Edgar okay? Do we have a problem here?*

Fidelis looked away from him and said, "She's having a hard time. This is true. And we have talked about it. She's entitled to some privacy, though, and I'm not going to just repeat what was said for all of you."

"If she's cracking up, it endangers the mission, Fidelis," Deborah said. Edgar was nodding along with her. "I could give a shit about her privacy."

"You know she's been skating on the edge of pathological for months, Fidelis," Katherine said. "If she's fallen over, you're the one who will know, and you can't keep it from us." Edgar and Deborah started to join in.

"Let me be clear about something," Fidelis snapped. The rest of them fell silent; they'd never heard him raise his voice except to laugh. "If I thought Jami was putting the mission in danger, I would of course tell David. I would not just tell whoever wanted to know, and I will not be bullied because you are all anxious. Do not insult me by turning me into a snitch, and do not insult me by suggesting I will not carry out my responsibilities." He glared at each of them in turn. When nobody said anything, he walked between Katherine and Edgar and went upstairs.

"He's not telling us everything he knows," Deborah said.

David waited to see if Edgar or Katherine had something to add. After

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a pause, he said, "He doesn't have to. You heard what he said. Do any of us really think that Fidelis Emuwa, of all people, is going to let personal feelings get in the way of his job? Come on."

Again he waited, and again none of them contradicted him, but David could tell they weren't convinced.

Gates Corporation communications records, August 22nd, 2011
Subpoenaed as evidence in the trial of Fidelis Liber Emuwa, David Louis Fontenot, Deborah Ruth Green, Edgar Carlos Villareal, and Katherine Alexandra Yi

Date: 22 Aug 2011, 14:35:06 GMT
To: Argos PM Roland Threlkeld
From: Tammy Gulyas, Argos Mission Liaison
Re: Argos trouble?

Rol,
David was in touch today. He's worried about Jami (still, or again) and Edgar (again). Doesn't think there's an immediate crisis, but wants to know how much pressure he can put on Fidelis. Jami's been talking to F. and the rest of the crew thinks he's holding out on them. D. worried that E. might get violent. Ethical issues are your dept., so I'm shuffling this one off. Vid of David's call attached.
Next time we need to send an actor along. Fuck brains, fuck weight restrictions. J. might look good, but she's an engineer. We need someone who can handle celebrity.
TG

Date: 22 Aug 2011, 16:11:53 GMT
To: Tammy Gulyas, Argos Mission Liaison
From: Argos PM Roland Threlkeld
Re: Argos trouble?

Tammy — 58 days to Earth-return liftoff. Sit tight. David's strung out like the rest of them. Jami's going to be fine, so is Edgar. Fidelis is a rock. ~R

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They all took Labor Day off. It was a gesture, really, since they could take all the days off they wanted. Their scientific objectives were long ago accomplished, and with the launch back to Earth less than six weeks away, Gates had clamped down on discretionary travel and exploration. So they played lots of euchre and went over preliminary checks and tried not to get on each other's nerves.

Fidelis spent the morning in the common room reading *Don Quixote* on the table screen. He had been keeping a careful eye on Jami for weeks now, since he'd seen her writing in the sand. She was holding herself together, but he could tell it wouldn't take much to unravel her. Everyone else in the crew had come to him wondering about her bright brittle smile, the metronomic way she did her work, ate her meals, slept and bathed and spoke. David in particular was worried, and seemed to be carrying some kind of guilt. "First I thought that when the attention went away, she'd settle down. And she did, kind of, but it wasn't real. Then I started to figure that as launch got closer and the nets started talking about engineering obstacles, she'd perk back up because they'd ask her technical questions, you know? Questions about her area of expertise. Things that make her sound good."

David scratched at his ear, something he did when he wasn't sure how to proceed.

"Then this goddamn latest Ebony Freytag," he said after a pause. "Getting my idiot cousin and Jami's twenty-year-old sister together. I can shake my head and forget about that kind of shit, you know? But I think that was some kind of last straw for her. The way she walks around now I keep thinking she's just going to fly apart. Like every wrinkle in her skin is a crack."

"We're still getting lots of questions," Fidelis pointed out.

"I know," David said. Edgar came in, and he lowered his voice. "But they're from twelve-year-olds and nutcases. It doesn't mean anything to her."

"Where's Deborah?" Edgar said. He had shaved his beard.

Fidelis looked at David. They both shrugged. "Haven't seen her."

"Maybe she's in the lab." Edgar turned to go.

"Edgar," Fidelis called. "Are you all right?"

"Fine fine fine, Doc," Edgar said. "Just time to talk, is all. She wanted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me to leave her alone, I left her alone. Now she's got to do something for me, and that's tell me what the hell is going on. Don't worry, I'm not mad, and she could kick my ass anyway, I think." It was probably true; Edgar and Deborah were about the same size, but when it came right down to it, she had a mean streak and he didn't.

Edgar wasn't the one Fidelis was worried about, anyway. "You know I have to ask," he said. Edgar waved a hand and left in the direction of the lab.

"You really think there's no problem?"

Fidelis shook his head. "They're not going to be back in bed, but I don't expect any real trouble, either. They were always together more out of some kind of rock-hound solidarity than because they liked each other."

David was looking at the doorway. "I wondered about that."

Jami walked in. "Fidelis!" she said with that bright and hopeless smile. "Just the man I wanted to see. Let's go for a hike."

From: Blaine Taggart
To: *Argos I* crew
Subject: 15 minutes

Dear Marsnauts: How does it feel to know that your moment in the spotlight has already passed you by? My dad was a comedian, had three minutes on Johnny Carson one night in 1981, and never got over it. Just curious. By the way, I hear the fungus in your Mars lichen has a common ancestor with some terrestrial fungus. So three cheers for panspermia, right?

"I'm not going back."

He had known she would say this sooner or later, and he had lost much sleep over the previous six or seven nights rehearsing possible responses. None of them seemed appropriate now. What could he tell her? That she would die? Of course she would die. That her family would miss her? She knew that. That she was going to be rich and famous, feted in castles and capitals?

"Jami," he said. "Do you know what will happen to us if you don't come back?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She glanced at him. "No. Come on, Fidelis. Appeal to my sense of responsibility to science, my desire for fame. Something. Just don't make me worry about you anymore."

"I don't think you have those things anymore. Once you did. All of this has fallen away from you."

Jami laughed. A little static sparked in Fidelis's mike. "Wasn't nirvana supposed to be the relinquishing of all desire? I forget. Can't remember religious things anymore. Here's your bodhisattva wisdom, Fidelis: you don't want me with you on the way back." She started walking away from him, gliding easily between boulders in the direction of the trail that led to the bottom of the canyon. "And I don't mean that personally, like people on the mission would rather see me stay. What I mean is, if you make me come with you, none of us will survive the trip home."

Look at me, he thought. I have to see what's in your face.

She did not speak, and he could not, and after a while she reached the trailhead and began her descent into the canyon.

HotVegas, September 5, 2011:

LABOR DAY SPECIAL — PLACE A $100 BET ON *ARGOS I*'S SAFE RETURN AND GET A FREE $50 BET ON THE WORLD SERIES! UNTIL THE 15TH ONLY!

Never in her life had Katherine come closer to violence than when she saw Jami chiseling circuitry out of the VR corder built into her suit helmet.

"What the hell are you doing?" she said.

Jami didn't look up. "I think I've had it with being a spectacle."

"Well, I haven't had it with fulfilling our contract. Stop that."

"Okay." Jami put down the small hammer and chisel she'd been using. "All done anyway."

Katherine punched the wall intercom mounted next to the interior airlock door. "David," she said. "Come here, please."

His voice popped through the speaker. "Problem?"

Katherine stabbed the button again. "Just come here, please."

Jami mounted the plate over the corder and started screwing it back into place. "Don't," Katherine said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Cleaning up, Katherine," Jami said. "Not hiding." But she put the plate back down.

David arrived. "What?"

Katherine was about to speak when Fidelis came into the lock too. It was crowded with the four of them and the eight suits hanging on wall racks. "I didn't ask him to come," Katherine said, pointing at Fidelis.

"Is this a private dispute?" David asked.

Briefly Katherine considered pushing the point. She and David both knew that Fidelis would defend whatever Jami was doing. To a certain extent that canceled out the benefit of the defense. "Never mind," she said. "I walked in here and Jami was sabotaging the recording equipment in her suit."

"Jami?" David asked.

"Guilty," she said immediately. With the toe of one shoe she scuffed at the bits of broken circuitry on the floor.

David sighed. "All right. Look. Jami — "

"How much money did she just cost us?" Katherine asked. She could already see David preparing to go easy on Jami. Well and good for him. He was one of the stars of the mission. She was just a member of the chorus, though, and nobody would be clamoring for her memoirs or her face on their screens. She'd have a good job when she got back, but she'd had a good job before leaving. The only reason she'd wanted to go to Mars in the first place was to cash in on whatever fame might come her way. The science she could have done at home, and Mars itself was so much empty, rock-strewn wilderness. She wouldn't miss it.

"I don't know," David said. After a pause he added, "Station vids are still going. Gates can piece something together. Unless — "

"Speaking of which," Jami said. She stood up and went to the intercom. "Everyone please come to the lock," she said. "No hurry." Then she woke up the terminal next to the intercom.

"What are you doing?" Katherine said.

"Shutting down the autofeed from the station vid." Katherine started to object, but David held up a hand.

"It's okay," he said. "Everything will still record. We can pipe it later."

The four of them stood there looking at each other until Edgar and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Deborah arrived. They had obviously been making love, the smell of it preceded them into the lock, and Katherine thought to herself, Jesus Christ.

"Okay," Jami said. "First I want to apologize. I haven't done anything to station recorders or the suit recorders except for mine. Gates will be pissed, but to be frank, what I'm about to do is worth a lot more money than what otherwise would have been on my corder."

"Jami," Fidelis said quietly.

"Shut up, Fidelis," Katherine said. "Let her take her own weight for once."

A ghost of a smile crossed Jami's face. "Thank you, Katherine. The short version is this: I'm not going back to Earth." The smile grew broader. Something about it made Katherine a little sick. "There. You're all rich."

"You're not staying here," David said.

"You can't make me go back. You could jump me and tie me down, but if you do that I'll kill myself. Can you keep me too doped up to do it for the next seven months?" She shook her head. "I don't think so. Katherine? You're the doctor. Fidelis? What kind of star material will I be after seven months of minimal-g drooling into my collar?"

The only sound in the room was the rattle of a loose valve cover on the outside of the lock. After some time, Fidelis spoke.

"I think Katherine will agree with me that there would be serious long-term consequences."

"There will be serious long-term consequences if she stays here," Katherine answered. "Since we're all being honest here, I'll admit that I'm sick and tired of the way we've all catered to Miss Jami Salter, but I don't want to see her dead. If she stays here, she'll die."

"I don't know about that," Edgar said. Deborah looked startled.

Jami was nodding. "The station is staying behind. The greenhouse will be here. The reactor will still be working long after all of us are dead. What else do I need?"

"This is ridiculous," Katherine said.

"I'm not going back to Earth," Jami said. "One way or another, I'm not going back."

InkStainedWretch.Com Headline Search, October 18, 2011:

COMING HOME!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marsnauts Come Home!
On Their Way
Gates, ISS Ready Decontamination Procedures
Demonstrators Demand *Argos* Quarantine
Mars Lichen Called 'Threat to Humanity'

Early in the morning of their last day on Mars, while Jami was running a last preflight check on the rendezvous vehicle, David gathered the rest of the *Argos I* crew in the common room. "We have a decision to make here," he said. "We're in a communications blackout for the next hour, so we vote right now. Leave Jami or force her to come along? Edgar: go."

"It's on her," Edgar said. "David and I can do her job on the way back. Let her stay."

"Fidelis."

"If she stays, she might survive. If we take her, she won't."

"Deborah."

"Bring her. We'll all be in jail if we don't."

"Katherine."

"Fidelis is wrong. And Edgar. She'll die here, and we don't have enough crew redundancy to be safe without her. Bring her."

David sighed. "Okay. Tiebreaker's on me." He paused. "She stays."

"You're fucking kidding," Deborah said.

"I'm fucking not." David looked around at all of them.

"This is Mars, David," Deborah said. "Not a desert island. Mars. She'll die."

"She'll have all the stuff that's kept us alive for the past fifteen months."

"And she'll die if she comes," Fidelis said. "If not on the voyage, soon after."

"You are endangering the mission," Katherine said. "Not to mention all of our lives. You can't do this."

"If we force her and something goes wrong, she could take all of us with her," David said. "I don't think we can risk it. There will be colonizing missions in four years. Six at the most. She'll be fine until then."

"Fine?" Katherine said incredulously. "Fine?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They all heard the inner airlock start to compress. Nothing was left to say.

"It really is beautiful here," Jami said. She was spending more and more time outside now, and since she'd wrecked her VR corder her mood had grown lighter. Some of the old genuine Jami Salter effervescence had returned, although tinctured by a sort of maturity that made Fidelis think of the stately poets he'd read in college English classes. Wordsworth, maybe.

He turned off his VR and lay back. Earth was one hundred days away, and Jami Salter was beyond human help.

During their last day on Mars, Fidelis had personally recorded everything after the meeting. He had been unable to take his eyes from her face, from the somehow beatific gaze she cast on him, on the rest of the crew, on the Martian landscape. He watched her as she helped them run the flight checks on the orbiter, as she brought the ERV back up from its hibernation, as she ran Edgar through all of the things she worried he might have forgotten. All of them had drilled in protocols for returning with a partial crew, and none of them was really afraid of what Jami's absence would mean for mission success. She had repaired and jerry-rigged electronics, yes, and piloted when shift scheduling called for it, and it was certainly possible that something would go wrong on the return voyage that only she would be able to correct. That worry was distant somehow, like the abstract concern of being holed by a meteor. Nothing that could usefully be worried about.

It hit him then: Jami, who had been their movie star, was now their guide. She would make sure they got home.

Fidelis had not cried since the birth of his daughter Emily. He found tears again on that last day he spent on the surface of Mars, and now on every day since when he gave himself over to the enormity of what they had done in leaving her behind.

From Fidelis Emuwa's personal multimedia record, October 17, 2011
Submitted as evidence in Bexar County Court, September 14, 2012

Can you imagine? It's already over. They're already moving on. Tomorrow *Argos I* lifts off, returns to Earth, and everyone on it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

commits to being forgotten. And I'm not such a drama queen that that's the most important thing. We commit to forgetting too, or to becoming the kind of person who does nothing but remember. That's the hell we've made for ourselves, Fidelis. For the rest of our lives, we'll either be answering questions about this mission or wishing people would ask. When they stop asking, we'll get louder, and then what happens?

No. Not me. Barbarella has left the building, Fidelis. I'm just Jami, and I'm just staying here. Nothing for me to go back to.

They made the ERV rendezvous without a hitch, and had already done the first acceleration burn when the commlink pinged with the Gates security code.

"What in the living fuck did you just do?" screamed Roland Threlkeld when David opened the connection.

David had to stifle a grin, imagining Rol boiling over while the rendezvous vehicle was incommunicado, and then while the ERV came out of Mars's communication shadow. It was a wonder he hadn't stroked out.

Are you laughing? he asked himself. *You left a crewmember behind on Mars. How can you laugh*?

The smile wouldn't go away.

Another burst from Roland: "Are you out of your fucking mind!? Jesus Christ on a goddamn Popsicle stick, you fucking left Jami fucking Salter on fucking *Mars*!!?"

The connection went dead.

"What are you going to tell him?" Deborah asked.

David thought about it. "Nothing until we've tweaked the accel burn and set the rotation. Once that's all settled, I'll figure something out."

Thirty-five minutes later, another profane tirade from Roland crackled out of the monitor. Thirty-five minutes after that, another. And another. Eventually, when they had the ERV moving like it was supposed to and rotating to give them Martian gee, David called everyone together. "Now we've done it," he said. "So we have to defend it. We can't lie, and we can't just say that we did what Jami wanted. We have to convince people that it was the only thing we could do. So. I'm listening."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We're all going to go to jail," Katherine said.

"I don't think so," countered Edgar. "If we argue that she was a danger to the mission, then all we were doing was saving ourselves."

"Do you believe that?" Fidelis asked.

Edgar lifted his chin. "Yes, I do."

"I think we endangered the mission by leaving her," Katherine said. "And not just our mission; have any of you thought about what this is going to do to the possibility of other Mars missions? What kind of harm have we done here?"

"None," David said. "Mars is bigger than us; people latched onto our faces, but the guys who put up the money are figuring that the consumerate will do the same for any group of Marsnauts. If nothing else, we've proved that sending six people hundreds of millions of miles to a hostile planet is like a license to print money. We won't be the last."

The commlink pinged. "That'll be Roland again," said Fidelis.

"Guess I should start putting together some kind of response. Unless one of you wants to do it?" They all just looked at him. Deborah and Fidelis at least had the grace to grin. "I didn't think so."

Roland Threlkeld's message started to unspool. All of them started to laugh. Even Edgar, who hated profanity, couldn't help but chuckle.

"One thing more," David said. "And this is not funny. Nobody in this crew is going to duck what we've done. We all stand up and we admit it, we take the heat for it. No excuses. We did what we did."

"Fair," Edgar said. "No hiding. We did this. We stand by it."

Article from the *Houston Chronicle*, August 18, 2012:

CHARGES AGAINST *ARGOS I* CREW DISMISSED

Bexar County District Judge Fulgencio Salazar has thrown out charges against David Fontenot in the marooning of Jami Salter on Mars.

Citing the prosecution's inability to produce any evidence either that Salter would in fact be harmed by remaining on Mars or that the crew had conspired against Salter's well-being, Judge Salazar dismissed felony charges against Fontenot and left little doubt that conspiracy and accessory charges against Fidelis Emuwa,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Deborah Green, Edgar Villareal, and Katherine Yi would be dismissed as well.

"I have as yet seen no persuasive evidence that a crime was committed by any of those charged," Judge Salazar said in the courtroom this morning, as Salter family members sat shocked and relatives and supporters of the other crew members exchanged broad smiles.

Outside the courtroom, Salter family attorney Michelle Braunschweig said that the family would consider its options. Attorneys for Emuwa, Green, Villareal, and Yi refused comment. David Fontenot's attorney Britt Kirschner told reporters that he considered his client's actions completely vindicated. "No one who was not on Mars with David Fontenot and the crew of *Argos I* should be sitting in judgment of what they did there. None of us has ever experienced anything like what they have. I have total confidence that David acted in the crew's best interests, the mission's best interests, and Jami Salter's best interests."

Kirschner, as he has done throughout the case, laid the blame for the situation on the voracious celebrity culture fostered by the commercial newsnets. "It is my fervent hope, and David's," he said, "that future Mars crews and colonists will not be turned into grist for the celebrity mill."

Planned future Mars missions at this time include hydrological surveys sponsored by Merck, JohnsonCo, and Werner GmbH. Each of these missions has been asked to determine the whereabouts and health of Jami Salter. A planned rescue/forensic-investigation mission financed by Gates appears to be on hold for now.

Eileen Aufdemberge looked at her sister Deb. Looked hard. They hadn't seen much of each other since Deb had returned from Mars, and today, out in the back yard where three years ago she'd tried to see *Argos I* when it was on the other side of the world, Eileen wanted to try to get to know her sister again.

Jared came out of the house. He'd slouched his way into adolescence since the last time Deb had visited. The ten-year-old who knew everything about his Aunt Deb had given way to a thirteen-year-old who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pretended not to care. Now he walked up to Deb and presented her with a bottle. MARTIAN HAIR, it said.

"They say it's got Martian chemicals in it, that it'll bleach your hair but not dry it out. Girls at school can't get enough of it."

"Are you serious?" Deb said. Eileen watched her turn the bottle and read its ingredients. She handed it back to Jared. "Tell them that peroxides are peroxides. If this stuff bleaches without drying, it's got nothing to do with Mars."

"Thanks, Aunt Deb," Jared said. He flipped the bottle up in the air and caught it behind his back. "You just made me ten bucks."

The screen door slid shut behind him. Eileen sat on the deck behind the house outside Knoxville she'd bought with Derek and kept when Derek left her for the woman who sold him his new car. She'd kept Jared too, but was happy to see the car go; it was one of those low-slung ostentatiously sporty models that Deb had always called "penis extenders."

Labor Day was the next Monday, and Deb had taken a long weekend away from her round of conferences and public appearances to lie on the grass in her sister's back yard and catch up on the previous three — almost four now, counting all the pre-launch buildup — years.

Where to start?

"So tell me all about it," she said.

"All about what?" Deb said, and they both smiled. Deb laced her fingers behind her head and looked up into the bright blue Tennessee sky. "I'm not sure I know how to talk about it yet," she said.

"Seems like that's all you do."

"I'm not sure I'm doing it right, though, really getting at it the way it was." Deb turned her head toward Eileen, who was sitting on the deck stairs with a glass of iced tea. "I wonder if Erik the Red had this problem.

"People made bets on whether we'd survive. People I didn't know got on international media outlets and said they'd had sex with me. I'm the first human being to discover life somewhere other than Earth, and when we piped the result back, everyone wanted to talk to Jami about it."

"What was that like? Discovering life, I mean." Eileen amended herself quickly, not wanting Deb to get into a Jami Salter rant. She still hadn't sorted out how she felt about the abandonment of Jami. The crew

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knew best, she supposed, but her sister had wanted to bring Jami back, and Eileen had always trusted Deb's judgment. Except once: Deb hadn't liked Derek Aufdemberge.

"It was, it was, it was," Deb said, rolling back to look up at the sky, "so mundane. Picking through rocks at the bottom of a giant rockslide, at the bottom of a canyon that makes the Grand Canyon look like a drainage ditch. Turn a rock over, hey look, there's some lichen. It's dead, obviously it lived in more protected circumstances, but it's lichen. You want to know something interesting? I can't tell the story like that when someone asks in public. I have this urge to embellish, or I'm afraid they won't be interested. I discovered life on Mars, and I'm afraid people will be bored because I'm not Jami Salter telling them. Jesus."

Neither of them spoke for a while. Music started up in Jared's room.

"What about Jami, Deb?"

"What about her?"

"You know what I mean."

Another pause.

"I have a little secret about that too," Deb said eventually. "As much as I got sick of everyone loving her and everyone wanting to talk to her and everyone ignoring me because I wasn't her, I have to admit that she took the heat for all of us. People wanted a mission babe, and they decided — for obvious reasons — that it was going to be Jami, and she hated it. But she did it."

"Did she want to stay on Mars, do you think?"

"Yeah, I think she did. I still don't think we should have let her, but, as usual, the men got their way."

This had been pointed out repeatedly in the media, with a variety of spins. Eileen wondered how to pursue it. "Didn't they like her? Were they afraid of her?"

Deb was shaking her head. "None of that. I think everyone there voted exactly what they thought was best. But still, all the men voted to leave her."

The music in Jared's room changed to an amped-up version of a song Eileen vaguely remembered from her own adolescence.

"It's still not fair," Deb said. "It's still not fair that they recognized her so much more than the rest of us. Sometimes I still think she stayed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

behind as one last gesture, so she had the last trump card over the rest of us. We'll never measure up to that. How can we?"

Eileen got up and went to lie in the grass next to her sister. "Who wants to measure up? What's to measure up to? You discovered life and water on Mars. She cracked up and couldn't go home. You want to measure up to that?"

Deb was shaking her head, but she reached over to clasp Eileen's hand. "Not that simple. She didn't just crack; she was broken. I don't think anybody could have just sailed through what happened to her."

"You just said that you went through the same kind of thing."

"Not the same."

"Yes, it is the same," Eileen insisted. "People seized on what was obvious about you, and they blew it up into something monstrous. They did the same thing with her. And with the rest of you, except David."

"David doesn't make much of an impression," Deb said. "A good guy, a smart guy, but not exactly memorable. Edgar asked me to marry him."

"What? Oh my God."

"I know. I'm terrified."

"What are you going to do?"

Deb was shaking her head. Eileen saw how much gray Mars had threaded into her hair. "Pick the petals off a daisy. Get my palm read. Consult a Magic 8-Ball. I don't know. God, I want to, Eileen. I think about him every second of the day, I want him next to me. If not closer." She grinned at Eileen. "He sure is fine between the sheets."

Eileen's first instinct was to say *Derek wasn't bad either*, but she bit it back. This was no time to mention Derek. So instead she said, "Do you think you can get along when you're not in the sack?"

"That's the thing," Deborah said. Now she looked sad and tired. "He voted to leave Jami. That's the thing."

Hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Space and Colonization, September 7, 2012:

> Senator Joshua Lindvahl: Jami Salter had everything to come back for. She was famous, she was going to be rich, she had made a professional name for herself in her field. She was a hero to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

people of Minnesota, whom I am privileged to represent, and to the country, and to the world. Why in God's name, Doctor Emuwa, would she just decide not to come back?

Fidelis Emuwa: Because seventy-three million people placed a bet with HotVegas on whether or not she would be killed in a fit of sexual jealousy.

The talk at Boston University had gone well, Fidelis thought, and it was good to be back in Massachusetts. He'd spoken all over the country, and in Switzerland and Italy and Japan, about the psychological stresses of deep-space missions. Everywhere people responded to his low-key authority, and in optimistic moments he felt that he might be doing his small part to effect some kind of change. There would be no avoiding commercial sponsorship of space exploration; given that, he felt it critical that the astronauts were protected better than the *Argos I* crew had been. He had his critics, but with Katherine saying much the same thing — in her more confrontational way — Fidelis was guardedly sure that future crews would not be quite the commodities that he and Jami and the rest of them had become.

He was standing in front of the business school watching the traffic on Commonwealth Avenue. Earth gravity still felt heavy in the muscles of his thighs. Maybe he would walk down Comm Ave., pick up a book and a burrito in Kenmore Square, walk the bridge over the Mass Pike to Fenway Park. The Sox, as usual, were out of it, but this looked to be Nomar Garciaparra's last year at short, and Fidelis wanted to see him play there one more time.

"Excuse me, Dr. Emuwa?"

Fidelis looked at the young man who had spoken, his dealing-with-the-public smile already falling into place. "Yes?"

"I'm Brad Reynolds, Dr. Emuwa. I'm a student here, and I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Fidelis looked more closely at this Brad Reynolds. An unexceptional young man. Spots of red in his cheeks, a fraternity ring his only jewelry. He had the khaki-and-razor-cut look that business students had chosen since World War II.

"I bet four hundred bucks that you'd be killed during the mission."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Brad Reynolds looked down, then back up into Fidelis's face. Gathering his courage, Fidelis thought. "I thought you'd all get into some kind of fight over Jami Salter, and I figured David and Edgar were tougher than you."

"You were right about that," Fidelis said.

"I shouldn't have done it," Reynolds went on. "It was a joke, you know, the whole thing." Reynolds squinted at Fidelis. "None of you were real."

"That's right," Fidelis said. "None of us were."

The wedding of Deborah Green and Edgar Villareal took place on September 24th, 2012, in the Garden of the Gods outside Colorado Springs. It was attended by forty-seven people and half a dozen hovering video drones sent by the more gossipy newsnets. The bride wore white. Her veil was beaded with pearls. The groom wore a morning suit, and was proud of having tied his cravat himself.

They had written their own vows, and the ceremony was quick. The only commotion occurred when Edgar's cousin Gerardo "accidentally" scattered the news drones by blasting through them in an old F-4 borrowed from the Air Force Academy, where both Edgar and Deborah had graduated too many years before. Afterward the newlyweds presided over their reception at the Broadmoor Hotel before hopping into Edgar's restored 1959 Bel Air and heading off on a driving honeymoon through the Rocky Mountain West.

No members of the *Argos I* crew were invited.

Hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Space and Colonization, January 14, 2013:

> David Fontenot: We found seventeen species of extraterrestrial life. We found enough water to ensure that colonization of Mars could be beneficial and productive in the long term. But mostly people were interested in a faked pornographic video of our engineer and backup pilot, and I think Jami couldn't come back to that. I think it got the better of her, and I think the only reason the rest of us survived is because she took the pressure of all that voyeurism onto herself.
>
> That's all I have to say, Senators. ⚜

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy&ScienceFiction MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. 96 page Catalog. $5.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

CRANK! magazine—back issues available. Le Guin, Fintushel, Lethem. Write Broken Mirrors Press, PO Box 1110, New York, NY 10159-1110.

14-time Hugo nominee. The New York Review of Science Fiction. *www.nyrsf.com* Reviews and essays. $3.50 or $32 for 12 issues, checks only. Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

The Magic Flute (ISBN 0-9674994-0-2) A fantasy novel, with some dragons and no elves, begun in the dark beyond midnight because there are some things we try to hide even from ourselves. *http://www.amazon.com/*

James P. Blaylock, *Thirteen Phantasms*, sixteen stories, $25.00. Books by Michael Bishop, Gwyneth Jones and Garry Kilworth also available. Edgewood Press, PO Box 380264, Cambridge, MA 02238

Zorena—A sword & sorcery fantasy novel. Suitable for young readers. By Beth David. PO Box 766, Fairhaven, MA 02719-0700. *www.zorena.com*

Tales of the Unanticipated, preeminent semipro SF/Fantasy/Horror/Unclassifiable magazine. Issue #24 is out. Back issues available. *www.totu-ink.com*

ASIAN HORROR ENCYCLOPEDIA. By horror critic, Laurence Bush. Unique reference guide to horror in Asian literature. Over 900 entries from ancient Chinese ghost stories to Japanese Cthulhu Mythos. Available at amazon.com, bn.com and most other internet stores.

NEW LEIGH BRACKETT COLLECTION *Martian Quest: The Early Brackett* $40 + $5 s/h to: HAFFNER PRESS, 5005 Crooks Road Suite 35, Royal Oak, MI 48073-1239, *www.haffnerpress.com*

Last Harry Stephen Keeler novel ever written! *The Scarlet Mummy, part 1.* See *www.ramblehouse.com* for many more hard-to-find old books. Ramble House 318-868-8727.

The Alternative History WWII. Rhodes books Feature action and battles. The Germans Win WWII in **The Last Reich** and the pursuit of the Nazi underground in **The Red Menace**. Special 3 volumes 4 books $39.95. *www.3mpub.com/rhodes.*

LE GUIN, SILVERBERG, STURGEON, more! Copies of the 320-page 50th Anniversary issue of F&SF are still available! $12.00 postpaid from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

BACK ISSUES OF F&SF: Issues from 1989-1995 are growing very scarce—fill the gaps in your collection while you can. Send for free list: F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

MISCELLANEOUS

ORDER NOW! Ray Bradbury's *It Came From Outer Space*, four screen treatments. Signed limited edition, never before published. *http://www.gauntletpress.com/*

POSTERS of two special F&SF Covers by Kent Bash, "The Auschwitz Circus" (June 1996) and "Dragons" (Feb 1997). 18" x 24", printed on high quality poster paper. $14.95 each, 2 for $25 from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

Help sf fans with physical problems that make reading difficult. *http://www.Read-Assist.org.*

F&SF classifieds work because the cost is low: only $1.50 per word (minimum of 10 words). 10% discount for 6 consecutive insertions, 15% for 12. You'll reach 100,000 high-income, highly educated readers each of whom spends hundreds of dollars a year on books, magazines, games, collectibles, audio and video tapes. Send copy and remittance to: F&SF Market Place, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CURIOSITIES

THUNDER ON THE LEFT, BY CHRISTOPHER MORLEY (1925)

TO CONCOCT a unique fantasy novel, mix a dash of Virginia Woolf's interior monologues, a jigger of Robert Nathan's whimsy, a *soupçon* of Noel Coward's witty sophistication, a handful of Kuttneresque children, and a pinch of Robert Aickman's eerie atmospherics. Stir all ingredients in the blender of Christopher Morley's talents, and the result is the airy yet grave comedy-cum-ghost-story *Thunder on the Left,* whose mysterious title derives from an apocryphal quote concerning oracles.

Morley's book is that very oracle, Delphically ambiguous. The first chapter focuses on a children's birthday party in honor of a boy named Martin, introducing us to his metaphysically troubled peers and their blithely cynical parents. Jump twenty-one years into the future, when several of those children-turned-adults are now regathered at the original summer-house scene for their own stale antics of adultery and ennui. ("It didn't seem quite square to be in love with a man and his wife simultaneously.") But also present are a child ghost named Bunny and the time-slipped child-in-a man's-body, Martin. Together, the two specters toss a spanner into the calcified adult patterns of behavior.

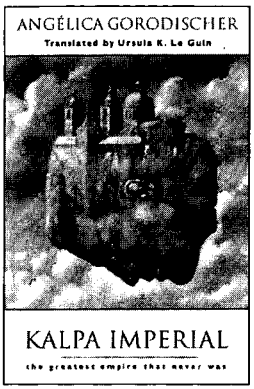
Morley never chooses a moral victor in his war between youth and experience. Childhood is simultaneously "slavery" and a golden age. Adults know cares and boredom, but also possess a sense of beauty foreign to kids. And over all the angst and laughter, a perfume of pagan romance is diffused.

"Life is a foreign language: all men mispronounce it." But artists like Morley utter its secrets more clearly than most.

—Paul Di Filippo

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New Titles from Small Beer Press



$16 1-931520-05-4

KALPA IMPERIAL

the greatest empire that never was

Empresses, emperors, storytellers, thieves . . .
and the Natural History of Ferrets.

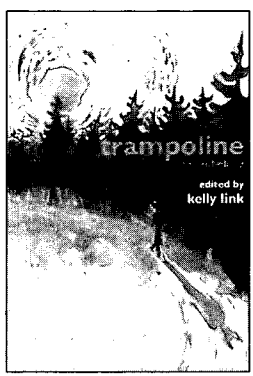
Multiple-award-winning Argentinean author ANGÉLICA GORODISCHER's novel has been translated into English by URSULA K. LE GUIN.

"Angélica Gorodischer has blended to perfection such wide ranging influences within fantastic literature in this century as those of Borges, Calvino and Kafka, with a voice of her own. . . . Angélica Gorodischer is the indisputable pride of the Argentinean literature."
—Mariana Amato, *La Nación,* Buenos Aires

Trampoline: an elastic mattress-like contrivance on which acrobats, gymnast, &c. leap.

Trampoline: an original anthology edited by Kelly Link, the award-winning author of *Stranger Things Happen,* and co-editor of the zine *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet.*

Trampoline: an anthology in the tradition of *Starlight, Dangerous Visions,* and *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales,* bringing together 20 astounding stories by Richard Butner, Alan DeNiro, Carol Emshwiller, Jeffrey Ford, Karen Joy Fowler, Greer Gilman, Glen Hirshberg, Alex Irvine, Shelley Jackson, Maureen McHugh, Christopher Rowe, Vandana Singh, & others.



$17 1-931520-04-6

Also Available:
Foreigners, and Other Familiar Faces
a chapbook written and illustrated by
Mark Rich
$5

Available in all good book shops and by mail order from Small Beer Press, 176 Prospect Avenue, Northampton, MA 01060.

Drop by our website for news, excerpts, interviews, chocolate subscriptions, and more: www.lcrw.net

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE WORLD OF DRAGONLANCE®
IS NOW YOURS TO EXPLORE.
BRING THE PAGES TO LIFE.

All trademarks are property of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. ©2003 Wizards
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED